



# Washington State Fusion Center INFOCUS



MONDAY — 27 DEC 2021

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## Events, Opportunities

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HEADLINE	<b>12/26 North end hit hard by winter blast</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://komonews.com/news/local/north-end-hit-hard-by-winter-blast-as-bone-chilling-temperatures-move-in">https://komonews.com/news/local/north-end-hit-hard-by-winter-blast-as-bone-chilling-temperatures-move-in</a>
GIST	<p>ALGER, Wash. -- Snohomish County road maintenance crews will switch from snowplowing to sanding and deicing Sunday night as temperatures continue to fall.</p> <p>At least 6 inches of snow had fallen in the Smokey Point area by late Sunday afternoon.</p> <p>A big concern in the north end over the coming days are the bone-chilling temperatures coupled with the wind chill, which could make it feel like below zero in some spots.</p> <p>Areas north of Arlington were some of the hardest hit from the winter blast that has now gripped much of Western Washington.</p> <p>"It's crazy," said Morri DeWitt. "We live on a hill back here – below this giant hill, the mountain. And there's no way we're gonna get anywhere for a long, long while because the way the snow is piling up."</p> <p>About 14 inches of snow now blanket her property just up the road from the Glenhaven Country Store.</p> <p>Some people relied on sleds to make trips to the store to get some much-needed supplies Sunday. Bone-chilling temperatures are expected across the region for the next several days.</p> <p>"Little bit of shopping. Got a 4-year-old, a 1-year-old at home, and a wife. And I live down the way in the snow and I had to take a sled to get the groceries," said Sierra Stratton. "I was stuck in my driveway and I couldn't get out."</p> <p>"It's beautiful, but it's a little too much," the owner of Glenhaven Country Store told KOMO News.</p> <p>Photos from some of WSDOT's cameras showed compact snow and ice on several main routes in Whatcom County on Sunday afternoon.</p> <p>A KOMO News viewer said his home near Lake Whatcom had been blanketed with approximately 13 inches of snow in the past 24 hours.</p> <p>In Mount Vernon, the city's snow plow trucks were working around the clock to try to keep roads clear.</p> <p>Fernando, an employee with Highline Pavement Maintenance, said the Red Door Antique Mall's parking lot was his third plowing job of the day. He had 5 more to go in Mount Vernon in Burlington.</p> <p>"It's gonna be a long week," KOMO News Anchor/Reporter Steve McCarron said to him.</p>

	<p>"Yeah," he replied.</p> <p>Over the coming days, the weight of all of the snow that's fallen could be too much for some trees and branches to handle.</p> <p>On Sunday, several trees fell across roads and onto power lines near Cain Lake.</p> <p>Greg Kloth stopped to put chains on his van in the Glenhaven area right before his first call of the day.</p> <p>"We can definitely tell the snow plows aren't out today. Very well," Kloth told KOMO News. "(The roads are) not good, but not bad. They're passable."</p> <p>With so much ground to cover, it will take some time before road maintenance crews can hit all of the main and secondary routes.</p> <p>"Hunker down, stay warm. I mean we lost power a couple times yesterday. Hopefully it doesn't want to wreck havoc again," said David Farrell, who lives in the Glenhaven area. "If that's the case, just gather close to the fire. Hot chocolate. Coffee. And anything warm we can get."</p>
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HEADLINE	<b>12/27 Somalia election standoff intensifies</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2021/12/27/somalia-farmaajo-roble-crisis/">https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2021/12/27/somalia-farmaajo-roble-crisis/</a>
GIST	<p>MOGADISHU, Somalia — Somalia's nearly year-long constitutional crisis escalated toward outright conflict Monday as the president attempted to sideline his main rival, the country's prime minister, by suspending his powers.</p> <p>Critics of the president, Mohamed Abdullahi Mohamed say he is using unconstitutional means to stay in power well past his term's end almost a year ago.</p> <p>Analysts have warned that a protracted political crisis distracts from the growing threat of al-Qaeda-affiliated al-Shabab, which controls most of southern Somalia's rural areas and launches regular attacks on Somali cities and in neighboring Kenya. The political standoff over a disputed election process veered into violence on the streets of Somalia's capital, Mogadishu, earlier this year.</p> <p>Mohamed's office did not respond to repeated requests for comment regarding the political impasse. In a statement, Mohamed said that the prime minister, Mohamed Hussein Roble, had acquired land fraudulently and that the purpose of suspending him was to allow for an investigation.</p> <p>Roble's office said he would not abide by Mohamed's decree, calling it an "outrageous statement," and said the deployment of soldiers to his office was a "failed attempt to militarily take over."</p> <p>"When the political elite are focused on each other, attention turns away from the battle against al-Shabab," said Omar Mahmood, senior Somalia analyst at the International Crisis Group. "Security forces that might otherwise be directed towards al-Shabab instead are turning inwards, providing greater latitude for the group to operate."</p> <p>The U.S. Embassy in Mogadishu issued a statement calling on the country's leaders to "take immediate steps to de-escalate tensions." The United States is Somalia's biggest unilateral donor and has plowed billions of dollars into security and state-building initiatives over the past decade.</p> <p>Somalia was meant to hold elections at the parliamentary and presidential levels starting last year, but the process, which involves an indirect selection of candidates by elders from the country's clan-based social structure, has been widely decried by Mohamed's opposition as rigged. A coalition of candidates including former presidents has boycotted the vote.</p>

When Mohamed — popularly known by his nickname “Farmajo” — won the last election, in 2017, many in the country had hoped the former New York state bureaucrat who held dual Somali and American citizenship would usher in a one-person, one-vote election system. Disputes over the process, difficulty creating a biometric system to register individual voters, and pandemic-related restrictions ended up derailing those aspirations.

“Farmajo was seen as a reformer who would prioritize security and building state institutions in Somalia,” said Mahad Wasuge, director of the think tank Somali Public Agenda. Instead, the election process this year is just as “complex and imperfect” as when Mohamed took office, Wasuge said.

Even the indirect election may take months more to get underway as the impasse between Mohamed and his opponents hardens. The opposition’s claims that the process is compromised have been bolstered by recent statements from pro-Mohamed politicians who have openly acknowledged the politicization of the election.

In one widely shared video, the vice president of Hirshabelle state told reporters that his administration would bypass traditional elders and handpick the winners of the state’s elections.

One would-be regional election candidate and a traditional elder involved in the candidate selection process told The Washington Post in interviews that they doubted the independence of the country’s electoral body.

Mohamed Osman Jawari, 76, a two-time speaker of the lower chamber of the Somali Parliament, said in an interview that when he had approached the president of the country’s South-West state to declare his intention to run, he was told that clan leaders would be instructed to quash his candidacy.

When he submitted his papers at the State Election Implementation Team, which is meant to be an independent body organizing the elections, his application was refused.

“The chairperson of SEIT told us that he is unable to accept my application without the approval of the regional president,” Jawari said.

Ahmed Aden Safina, SEIT’s spokesman, said the body remains independent and that regional presidents may oversee the approval of candidates but not interfere with the process. He said Jawari’s complaint is being reviewed.

Before Mohamed’s move on Monday, the U.S. State Department issued a statement reiterating that it was “deeply concerned by the continuing delays and by the procedural irregularities that have undermined the credibility of the [election] process.”

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HEADLINE	12/24 Pandemic collective trauma: breaking point
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.washingtonpost.com/health/2021/12/24/collective-trauma-public-outbursts/">https://www.washingtonpost.com/health/2021/12/24/collective-trauma-public-outbursts/</a>
GIST	<p>An airplane passenger is accused of <a href="#">attacking a flight attendant</a> and breaking bones in her face. Three New York City tourists <a href="#">assaulted a restaurant host</a> who asked them for proof of vaccination against the coronavirus, prosecutors say.</p> <p>Eleven people were charged with misdemeanors after they allegedly <a href="#">chanted “No more masks!”</a> and some moved to the front of the room during a Utah school board meeting.</p> <p>Across the United States, an alarming number of people are lashing out in aggressive and often cruel ways in response to policies or behavior they dislike.</p>

“I think people just feel this need to feel powerful, in charge and connected to someone again,” said Jennifer Jenkins, a school board member in Brevard County, Fla., who said she has faced harassment.

The Federal Aviation Administration has initiated over 1,000 [unruly-passenger investigations](#) this year, more than five times as many as in all of 2020. [Health](#) and [elections](#) officials have expressed fear for their safety amid public vitriol.

As school board meetings have become cultural battlegrounds, Attorney General Merrick Garland [has asked the Justice Department to investigate](#) what he called a “disturbing spike” in threats against educators. Some American shoppers, long used to getting their way, [have unleashed their worst behavior](#) in recent months.

In some of these circumstances, it’s unclear whether aggressive behavior has actually increased this year or whether the public has simply trained more focus on it. But mental health experts said it’s likely that the worldwide state of perpetual crisis has truly spurred more frequent instances of inappropriate and abusive behavior.

Nearly two years into a pandemic coexistent with several national crises, many Americans are profoundly tense. They’re snapping at each other more frequently, suffering from physical symptoms of stress and seeking methods of self-care. In the most extreme cases, they’re acting out their anger in public — bringing their internal struggles to bear on interactions with strangers, mental health experts said.

Some of those behaviors appear to be the result of living through a long-lasting public emergency with no clear endpoint, the experts said. As the omicron variant rages across the country, it is again unclear when the pandemic restrictions will end. For some people, this kind of catastrophe strains their coping resources and causes them to act in ways that they normally would not.

Layer that onto other recent national crises — including race-driven social unrest, an economic recession, the Jan. 6 attack on the Capitol and myriad extreme-weather disasters — and people can hardly bear the stress.

“We’re just not meant to live under this level of tension for such a prolonged period,” said Vaile Wright, senior director of health care innovation for the American Psychological Association. “So what that ends up doing is it really wears on our coping abilities to the point where we aren’t able to regulate our emotions as well as we could before.”

That kind of emotional tension is most relevant to people who continue to take precautions and factor the virus into their decision-making. Much of the country [has long moved on](#) from tracking the pandemic’s every turn, with many people instead living much like they were in 2019.

But research supports the idea that Americans as a whole are struggling mentally and emotionally. A study of five Western countries, including the United States, published in January found that 13 percent of people reported symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder attributable to actual or potential contact with the [coronavirus](#), stay-at-home orders, the inability to return to a country of residence or other coronavirus-related factors. The researchers also found that anticipating a negative pandemic-related event was even more emotionally painful than experiencing one.

The coronavirus outbreak had barely begun when mental health experts started expressing concern that the crisis would cause collective trauma, which occurs when a deeply distressing event affects an entire community [and creates a shared impact](#). Although psychologists disagree on the definition of trauma and whether the term applies broadly to the pandemic, they are generally in sync on the underlying issue: The pandemic’s devastating consequences have spared almost no one.

Of course, the coronavirus has hit some people and communities harder than others. The families of more than 800,000 people in the United States — [disproportionately Black, Latino, American Indian and Alaska Native](#) — have lost a loved one to the virus. Others have been hospitalized and survived. Almost everyone

has sacrificed an important aspect of their lives: a job, the ability to safely gather to mourn a death or celebrate a marriage, or any degree of certainty in planning the future.

It remains unclear when that suffering will end. Reported infections and hospitalizations in the United States are surging as the country finds itself facing a variant that appears to be more transmissible and better at evading protection from approved vaccines and as holiday gatherings provide new opportunities for viral transmission.

That danger heightens the feeling of whiplash among people tired of the pandemic's twists and turns, said Roxane Cohen Silver, a professor of psychological science at the University of California at Irvine.

"The news about the omicron variant came right at the time that many people in the U.S. were poised to spend the Thanksgiving holiday with loved ones for the first time in a long time," she said. "It seemed almost cruel that just when 'normalcy' seemed to be on the horizon, hopes were again dashed with the latest news."

Worry about the pandemic, climate change and other crises has made Kia Penso, 61, so on edge that she can't watch suspenseful television shows, and interactions with her brother when she is worried about him have become "10 times more explosive." Her past year and a half has been marked by her uncle's death from covid-19 and persistent worry about the safety of her elderly mother overseas.

Those stresses have been exacerbated by her feeling that the coronavirus's threat would be negligible by now if other people hadn't fallen victim to false claims that the federally approved or authorized vaccines are dangerous. The Food and Drug Administration and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention have consistently said the immunizations [are safe and effective](#).

"We're still in danger, we're still cooped up in our houses to some extent, we're still not free to move about because of malevolent lies," said Penso, who lives in D.C.

On a flight this year, Teddy Andrews's colleague walked over to him on the verge of tears. A passenger was refusing to wear a mask and giving her a hard time, his fellow flight attendant said.

Andrews approached the man, who called him the n-word and said, "I don't have to listen to a damn thing you say, this is a free country," according to Andrews's testimony later before a congressional committee.

A tense exchange followed, with Andrews asking the man to don a mask to protect his fellow passengers. Eventually, the man backed down and put on the face covering.

Andrews, who has been an American Airlines flight attendant for a decade, said he believes years of heated rhetoric from political leaders has riled people up and encouraged them to defend themselves against the purported erosion of their rights. Then the pandemic erupted. The result, from Andrews's perspective, is an epidemic of people behaving as if rules and social norms don't apply to them.

"What we see manifested in society, you'll see it happening in the air, you see it happening in restaurants, you see it happening in malls, you see it happening in school board meetings," he said.

For a few weeks this summer, low infection numbers served as a light at the end of the tunnel for people eager to move on from the pandemic. That hopefulness made it harder for many people to handle the abrupt about-face when the delta variant fueled a new surge, said Wright, with the American Psychological Association.

People are also faced with constant news about the virus, making coping even more difficult, said UC-Irvine's Silver.



“Even if I personally have not lost a loved one to covid, I can be seeing pictures and reading stories about the sheer tragedies,” said Silver, an expert in trauma. “So it’s both direct exposure and indirect exposure to the media of all of these cascading traumas that have made it so difficult to cope with it.”

Stress from those cascading traumas is cumulative, Silver has found.

Whether it’s the death of a loved one or the cancellation of a vacation, the pandemic’s losses are more likely to linger in people’s minds than the positive experiences, said Stevan Hobfoll, a researcher and clinician with expertise in trauma. The human brain searches for hidden losses, he said, so people are more likely to think about how much they miss traveling than about improving infection numbers.

Then there’s the struggle to maintain hope, which is complicated by the pandemic’s lack of a clear endpoint. Early in the crisis, many people identified what they could control and created routines, said Joshua Morganstein, chair of the American Psychiatric Association’s Committee on the Psychiatric Dimensions of Disaster. But he said that intentionality has largely fallen by the wayside and people have become more distressed.

In Florida, emotions over school district policies were boiling over for months before Jenkins spoke publicly about the harassment she said she faced. Angry about decisions around masks, transgender students and teaching about race, some parents had threatened her, coughed in her face and filed false reports with the Florida Department of Children and Families, she said. (The agency did not respond to a message seeking confirmation of those reports.)

At a board meeting in October, Jenkins said she supported parents’ right to protest but would not stand for credible threats of violence against her family.

“I reject them following my car around, I reject them saying that they’re coming for me and I need to beg for mercy,” she said. “I reject that when they are using their First Amendment rights on public property, they’re also going behind my home and brandishing weapons to my neighbors.”

In Jenkins’s eyes, the outbursts are fueled by widespread pandemic-induced vulnerability and a desire for purpose that some people have learned to manipulate by building communities around angry, public resistance to policies and officials. She said she thinks that a general lack of societal trust also contributes and that the lack of connection makes arguments out of what could have been conversations.

The last large-scale pandemic was similarly divisive. As influenza cut a destructive path around the world in 1918 and 1919, many businesses refused to enforce mask mandates and roughly 2,000 members of an “Anti-Mask League” rallied in San Francisco to oppose the ordinances. The coronavirus pandemic has the complicating factor of a hyperactive social media ecosystem that overloads people with often-conflicting information.

“When people are presented with situations that seem overwhelming, they are more apt to give up in a sense and lock more tightly to a single perspective and approach, because the work that’s necessary to hold on to all this different information is just too much,” Morganstein said.

Coronavirus pandemic-era anger also has coalesced around whether mask and vaccine requirements violate individual liberty — an issue that Morganstein said tends to animate people. Many public outbursts have been from people vehemently expressing that no one else can tell them what to do. The result is an environment where trust in other people is severely limited.

That lack of social cohesion prolongs people’s sense of crisis, Silver said. In [a study of Israelis who survived years of bombing](#), she found that those who fared well did so in part because they had a strong sense of community. Without that sense of national community in the United States, people lean on their smaller tribes of people with similar worldviews, Silver said.

	<p>By June, before the delta and omicron variants became widespread, levels of anxiety and depression in the United States had declined from their pandemic peak but remained higher than in 2019, according to a study published by the CDC. And more than 80 percent of psychologists told the American Psychological Association that they had experienced an increase in demand for anxiety treatment since the pandemic began, compared with 74 percent who said the same a year ago.</p> <p>Additionally, about 2 in 3 vaccinated Americans said they were “angry at those who are refusing to get vaccinated against COVID-19 and are putting the rest of us at risk,” according to a survey this fall by the Public Religion Research Institute and the Interfaith Youth Core.</p> <p>For Jennifer Le Zotte, a college professor in North Carolina, a challenge of the pandemic’s ceaselessness has been feeling disconnected from her personal communities. She wonders when she’ll feel comfortable fully reengaging in her pre-pandemic activities, and she said she’s constantly recalculating her family’s risk as the facts of the coronavirus outbreak change.</p> <p>Le Zotte said that after keeping her children and elderly parents safe for nearly two years, she would feel deeply troubled if she lowered her defenses now and one of them contracted the virus. But being constantly on guard feels emotionally draining.</p> <p>“Part of me feels like I have to finish this,” she said. “But,” she believes, “there is never going to be a concise finish.”</p>
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<b>HEADLINE</b>	<b>12/26 Federal program covers Covid funeral cost</b>
<b>SOURCE</b>	<a href="https://apnews.com/article/coronavirus-pandemic-business-health-emergency-management-federal-emergency-management-agency-0b63f9fc4ea0c5948addc53e6b1c7">https://apnews.com/article/coronavirus-pandemic-business-health-emergency-management-federal-emergency-management-agency-0b63f9fc4ea0c5948addc53e6b1c7</a>
<b>GIST</b>	<p>BOSTON (AP) — When Wanda Olson’s son-in-law died in March after contracting COVID-19, she and her daughter had to grapple with more than just their sudden grief. They had to come up with money for a cremation.</p> <p>Even without a funeral, the bill came to nearly \$2,000, a hefty sum that Olson initially covered. She and her daughter then learned of a federal program that reimburses families up to \$9,000 for funeral costs for loved ones who died of COVID-19.</p> <p>Olson’s daughter submitted an application to the Federal Emergency Management Agency, received a deposit by June and was able to reimburse her mother the \$1,974.</p> <p>“Had this not been available, we would have been paying the money ourselves,” said Olson, 80, of Villa Rica, Georgia. “There wasn’t any red tape. This was a very easy, well-handled process.”</p> <p>As of Dec. 6, about 226,000 people had shared in the nearly \$1.5 billion that FEMA has spent on funeral costs that occurred after Jan. 20, 2020, the date of the first confirmed case of COVID-19 in the U.S. With the nation’s coronavirus death toll topping 800,000, it’s clear that many families who are eligible for reimbursement have yet to take advantage of the funeral benefit.</p> <p>Her son-in-law was traveling a lot, working on air conditioning systems in theaters, restaurants and businesses, when he began feeling ill, Olson said. After a few days at home, he went to the hospital and was put on a ventilator. He died several weeks later.</p> <p>“He could never overcome it,” she said.</p> <p>To be eligible for reimbursement, death certificates for those who died after May 16, 2020, must indicate that the death was attributed to COVID-19.</p>



For deaths that occurred in the early months of the pandemic — from Jan. 20 to May 16, 2020 — death certificates must be accompanied with a signed statement from a medical examiner, coroner or the certifying official listed on the certificate indicating that COVID-19 was the cause or a contributing cause of death.

The percentage of individuals who have been reimbursed varies dramatically from state to state — from nearly 40% in North Carolina and Maryland to fewer than 15% in Idaho and Oregon, according to state-by-state data compiled by FEMA.

While the reimbursement must go directly to individuals, some funeral directors have taken on the task of informing grieving families of the benefit.

After the benefit was first announced, David Shipper, owner of the Sunset Funeral Home, Cremation Center & Cemetery in Evansville, Indiana, took out ads to let people know that help was available if they qualified.

“Nine thousand dollars — that’s a lot of money. We wanted to find a way to tell people about it,” he said. “We stopped advertising some time ago, but when we have a new family with a death from COVID, we tell them about the program.”

Workers at the home will sit down with families, gather the needed paperwork, contact FEMA on the phone and help walk them through the process if they ask, he said.

Many families may simply be unaware of the benefit, but others may opt against seeking the cash out of reluctance to revisit the pain of the death, Shipper said. He said the better time to seek the help is when planning the funeral.

“They’re much more likely to take advantage right then than if they’ve already spent the money and don’t want to open it up again,” Shipper said.

The largest states account for some of the biggest shares of the FEMA reimbursement money.

The program has paid out more than 21,000 reimbursements in California and Texas, which have both reported more than 74,000 COVID-19 deaths. Residents applied for more than \$141 million in each state.

The fewest number of reimbursements have occurred in Vermont, where 123 people were awarded a total of about \$704,000.

Expenses covered under the FEMA program include funeral services, cremation and interment, as well as the costs for caskets or urns, burial plots or cremation niches, markers or headstones, transportation or transfer of remains, clergy or officiant services, and the use of funeral home equipment or staff.

The program has been funded using federal stimulus funds, and money remains available. No online applications are allowed.

After all required documents are received and verified, it typically takes fewer than 30 days to determine if an individual is eligible, according to FEMA. Once eligibility is confirmed, applicants who request direct deposit may receive the money in a matter of days. It may take longer for applicants who request a check.

The reimbursement is one way of helping ease the emotional and financial burden that the pandemic has wreaked on communities across the country according to Ellen Wynn McBrayer, president of Jones-Wynn Funeral Homes & Crematory in Villa Rica, Georgia.

She recalled one woman who lost her mother, husband and one of her children to the disease in the span of six months. One of the workers at the funeral home also succumbed to the virus.

	“To have to help a grieving family is hard on a normal day, but to see so many deaths,” she said. “COVID has just broken a lot of hearts and taken a lot of lives.”
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HEADLINE	<b>12/27 Philippines’ devastation by super typhoon</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.nytimes.com/2021/12/27/world/asia/philippines-super-typhoon-rai.html">https://www.nytimes.com/2021/12/27/world/asia/philippines-super-typhoon-rai.html</a>
GIST	<p>MANILA — “The trees snapped like matchsticks.”</p> <p>Ed Boysillo, 54, a municipal worker in Ubay, in the central Philippine province of Bohol, was describing the fearsome power of Super Typhoon Rai. The storm made its first landfall on Dec. 16, bringing torrential rains and packing winds up to 168 miles per hour, comparable to a Category 5 hurricane.</p> <p>It blew away buildings, swelled rivers to overflow and forced more than seven million people to flee their homes. It cut off power, water and communications. It damaged critical infrastructure.</p> <p>As of Monday morning, the storm had killed 389 people, injured 1,146 others and left 65 missing, official figures show. More than half a million people were still in evacuation centers or staying with friends and relatives.</p> <p>The smell of death hung in the air in Bohol, where a family emerged from the wreckage to try to salvage a door festooned with Christmas decorations. An inflatable Santa Claus that had survived the lashing winds swayed forlornly in the air, its affable face a striking contrast to the destruction.</p> <p>Antero Ramos, 68, who is from the village of Casare in Ubay, lost his wife, Tarsila Ramos, 61, and two of his daughters, Nita, 37, and Nenita, 28, in the storm.</p> <p>“My wife decided that we should evacuate, so we decided to shelter in the bodega we used to store rice,” he said. “But as soon as we entered, the bodega collapsed on us,” he said.</p> <p>The bodega’s caretaker also perished.</p> <p>“This is a very sad Christmas,” Mr. Ramos said. “We had to bury them immediately because the funeral parlor could not get to the bodega because of the debris that was still on the roads.”</p> <p>Rai, the international name for the storm (the local name is Odette), was the 15th typhoon to hit the country this year. The storm made eight more landfalls in multiple regions before veering away.</p> <p>The Philippines sits on a typhoon belt and typically gets by about 20 storms a year. After Rai’s devastation, the country’s Climate Change Commission called for urgent action at the local level “to build community resilience against extreme climate-related events and minimize loss and damage.”</p> <p>“As the level of global warming continues to increase,” it said in a statement last week, “these extreme weather events and other climate impacts are becoming severe, and may be irreversible, threatening to further set back our growth as a nation.”</p> <p>In Bohol, where many of the storm deaths were recorded, overturned vehicles were piled up on the side of the highway and in fields on Monday. Countless trees and debris littered the terrain. Many of the deaths had occurred in coastal areas inundated by storm surges or where people had been crushed by houses that crumbled in the wind. Everywhere, people could be seen scouring the ruins of homes to salvage what was left of their old lives.</p> <p>On a highway leading to Ubay, near a bay in Bohol, survivors of the storm had scrawled, “Help us,” a desperate plea to passing helicopters and airplanes.</p>

Officials warned that residents in remote areas were running out of food. Countries such as the United States, Canada, China and South Korea have pledged aid. A United Nations agency called for \$107.2 million “to support the government in responding to the most urgent humanitarian needs for the next six months.”

Bohol’s governor, Arthur Yap, has sought donations to purchase food and other relief items. An early appeal brought in generators, but fuel is now a coveted commodity.

“Many bought generators, and that tripled the demand for gasoline,” Mr. Yap told reporters on Friday. “That’s the reason why we have long queues at the gasoline stations.”

Ananisa Guinanas, 27, went to get gasoline on Friday in Ubay with her 3-year-old daughter. Police officers were guarding the site.

“We have been lining up for the past seven hours,” she said. “I brought my daughter because I couldn’t leave her. Our house was destroyed. We desperately need gasoline for the motorcycle we would use to look for water.”

After the storm, the Loboc River turned brown from mud and debris.

Nilo Rivera, 34, said his and his mother-in-law’s houses were quickly swept away by the river’s rampaging waters once the storm hit.

“The water reached up to the second floor of our homes,” he said, pointing to a water line beside a structure left standing after the muddy water subsided.

They were now living in a makeshift tent.

Bohol is also no stranger to calamities. A powerful quake destroyed one of its churches in October 2013 and severely damaged infrastructure. Casualties were low because the temblor had struck on a holiday.

A month later, Super Typhoon Haiyan, the most powerful storm to make landfall in the country’s recorded history, devastated huge swaths of the Philippines.

The death toll: 6,500 dead and missing.

Frederic Soupart, the owner of the Fox and the Firefly resort in Bohol, says he believes that Rai was worse than Haiyan. Rai left destruction everywhere as it exited through the Palawan Islands, in the western Philippines. Parts of his resort were buried in waist-deep muck.

“I’ve never seen any flooding like this,” he said, estimating that damage from the storm would cost millions of Philippine pesos to repair. His resort is next to the Loboc River, and he and his staff had to shovel mud from the property.

“It doesn’t feel like Christmas,” Mr. Soupart said. “I was buying stuff at the hardware store, and the Christmas songs annoyed me.”

Cleanup operations have been slow, although the Philippine military had deployed engineering crews to help rebuild. Electricity and telecommunications had yet to be restored in Bohol and in many other areas.

In Siargao, a surfing destination on the northeastern tip of Mindanao Island, east of Bohol, no structure was spared damage.

The government evacuated dozens of foreign tourists and Filipinos on a military plane. But some chose to stay behind to help rebuild.

	<p>Vice President Leni Robredo, who was among the first national officials to reach devastated sites, said on Friday in a Christmas message, “Hope is found in togetherness.”</p> <p>Many Filipinos sought comfort in the church. Priests appealed for calm as the national government scrambled to get aid to residents. Worshipers in Bohol used flashlights and candles to hold Mass at dawn.</p> <p>Donn De Lima, 44, was among dozens from the Santo Niño Parish in Ubay who attended Mass on Christmas Eve. It was raining hard, and the roof of the church leaked.</p> <p>“This Christmas is sad because my home was heavily damaged,” he said. After Mass, his family planned to share a simple meal under a rechargeable flashlight.</p> <p>Others were not as lucky.</p> <p>Alicia Nemenzo, 48, and her daughter Mavel Nemenzo, 21, spent Christmas Eve sheltering in a tiny roadside store after the storm wrecked their home. Their only source of light was a flickering candle.</p> <p>“When it rains now, we get frightened,” she said. “I think we all were traumatized by this typhoon.”</p>
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HEADLINE	12/26 US enters Year Three
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.axios.com/america-third-year-covid-c779feaa-b257-4544-968d-d2f1b9be862c.html">https://www.axios.com/america-third-year-covid-c779feaa-b257-4544-968d-d2f1b9be862c.html</a>
GIST	<p>America's third year of dealing with the pandemic is likely to start as bleak as ever, with a devastating Omicron surge for the first couple of months.</p> <p><b>Yes, but:</b> Experts are hopeful that once the wave of cases, hospitalizations and deaths caused by the Omicron variant ebbs, life will finally be able to more closely resemble normal.</p> <p><b>Between the lines:</b> The silver lining of a tough January and February is that most of the country could have some degree of immunity afterward — either through vaccination, infection or both — that helps protect them against severe COVID infections in the future.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “It's conceivable that, sooner or later, that everybody will have been infected and/or vaccinated or boosted,” NIAID director Anthony Fauci told Axios.</li> <li>• “When you get to that point, unless you have a very bizarre variant come in that evades all protection — which would be unusual — then I think you could get to that point where you have this at a steady level.”</li> <li>• And a fourth shot isn't off the table, Fauci said: “It is entirely conceivable that that may be the case.”</li> </ul> <p><b>State of play:</b> The new year “will start with an almighty surge of Omicron. This will play out differently in various places, but it is hard to imagine anywhere will be spared,” emailed Bill Hanage, a professor of epidemiology at Harvard.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “By the time the spring rolls around, a lot of people are going to have had the experience of having had COVID,” he added.</li> <li>• It's still unclear whether Omicron causes milder disease than other variants, although initial data indicates that's the case, if only because of how many people have some level of immunity. But its rapid rate of spread could still lead to overwhelmed health systems even if it is milder.</li> </ul> <p><b>What they're saying:</b> “The best possible scenario is Omicron tears through the population, it causes a month or a month and a half of economic disruption and illness, and then we’re through it,” said Megan Ranney, an emergency physician and academic dean for Brown’s School of Public Health.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “The worst-case scenario is Omicron ends up being much more severe, overwhelms and crushes our hospital systems, and then gets followed by a worse variant,” she added.</li> <li>• And then, of course, there's the spectrum of scenarios in between the two.</li> </ul>

**The big picture:** Experts say we're never going to be 100% done with the coronavirus. The hope is that it becomes more like background noise.

- "I don't think we're ever returning to a normal that's pre-2019. For one thing, COVID is going to be circulating, and it's going to be part of our ongoing lives," said Zeke Emanuel, vice provost for global initiatives at the University of Pennsylvania.
- "The optimistic scenario in my mind is come June, July we're pretty close to normal."

**The bottom line:** It'll soon be the two-year anniversary of March 2020's "[15 Days to Slow the Spread](#)," and between now and then we're likely to see caseloads higher than anything we've seen before.

- But there are several big differences between now and then. We have excellent vaccines, a growing arsenal of therapeutics and a much better understanding of the virus we're dealing with. But we also have a considerable amount of pandemic burnout and deep divisions over how it should be handled.
- "We're moving into the third year of something that feels frustratingly predictable and avoidable," said Saskia Popescu, an Arizona-based epidemiologist.
- "Everyone is in a very exhausted frame of mind where you have a lot of false dichotomies, a lot of us versus them — which doesn't help anybody — and we're increasingly struggling with the basics [while] also facing nuanced challenges."

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HEADLINE	<b>12/26 Snow blankets Puget Sound region</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.seattletimes.com/seattle-news/weather/heavy-snow-blankets-the-puget-sound-with-a-winter-storm-warning-this-morning/">https://www.seattletimes.com/seattle-news/weather/heavy-snow-blankets-the-puget-sound-with-a-winter-storm-warning-this-morning/</a>
GIST	<p>Western Washington woke up to a blanket of snow Sunday and the flakes just kept falling, not letting up until holiday travel had been disrupted, sledders had hit their neighborhood slopes and severe weather shelters had been opened to help people without housing get indoors.</p> <p>The storm stopped in the Seattle area shortly before dark, but the snow should stick around all week, with temperatures in the teens and more snow expected.</p> <p>That combination could make roads slick and dangerous, noted Mary Butwin, a meteorologist with the National Weather Service's Seattle office.</p> <p>"What we're going to be seeing for the next few days is very cold temperatures, by Western Washington standards," Butwin said, predicting highs in the mid-20s and lows in the teens for the Seattle area starting Sunday night.</p> <p>"We haven't seen temperatures like this in the last several years," she added, mentioning that lows could reach the single digits around Bellingham.</p> <p>Sunday's snow showers blew into Western Washington from the Gulf of Alaska, dumping an average of 4 to 6 inches across the Seattle area, Butwin said. More snow is predicted for Thursday, but probably not quite as much, she said.</p> <p>The wind also whipped around Sunday, with gusts reaching 52 mph in Bellingham.</p> <p>Waking up to sidewalks, trees and steps topped with snow, some Seattle-area residents hunkered down with blankets and books, while others plunged into the powder. Pretty much everyone posted photos on social media sites, showcasing dogs, snowpeople and cityscapes.</p> <p>Almost immediately, the weather began wreaking havoc on the roads. The Washington State Department of Transportation, which urged motorists to stay home, if possible, and slow down, reported collisions and disabled vehicles throughout the day, including on Interstate 5.</p> <p>As some bare patches of asphalt began to appear Sunday afternoon, officials issued a warning.</p>

“Don’t be fooled. Those wet roads will turn to ice in a big hurry,” they posted on Twitter.

Holiday travelers making their way to and from Western Washington locales encountered challenges here, there and everywhere, including at Seattle-Tacoma International Airport, where departing and arriving flights were delayed by about an hour Sunday morning. As of 6:30 p.m., according to FlightAware, a tracker recommended by an airport spokesperson, 208 flights at Sea-Tac had been delayed (40% of all flights) and 423 had been canceled (27%).

“The rough part today is that the airlines are responsible for de-icing their planes,” which led to backups, airport spokesperson Kate Hudson said. “One plane can’t push back [from its gate] until it gets de-iced, so another plane can’t come in [to let passengers off].”

On social media, some passengers reported waiting on the tarmac for hours. The last time the airport experienced such demanding wintry circumstances was almost three years ago, in February 2019, said Hudson.

During that storm, workers at Sea-Tac removed enough snow from planes to fill 48 swimming pools, Hudson said. But the 2019 storm didn’t occur during the holiday season and a pandemic.

Ahead of the snow and cold temperatures, last Friday, Seattle Mayor Jenny Durkan issued an emergency proclamation directing resources toward the city’s response, with the weather’s threat for people without housing presenting a particularly urgent concern.

Durkan also signed an order granting incentive payments of up to \$150 per shift for work at shelters and warming centers, including some opened on a temporary basis. Those included spaces at City Hall and Seattle Center, with several community centers slated to open Monday.

Outreach workers began visiting encampments Saturday afternoon, with hypothermia a major worry for public health officials.

More than a half-dozen people, including regulars and newcomers, stayed Saturday night at a shelter with limited space managed by Keith Hughes, commander of American Legion Post 160 in West Seattle.

“I hope that in the future, the awareness with the city and the county will include all areas of Seattle, not just the downtown core,” Hughes said.

There were numerous closures due to Sunday’s weather, including Woodland Park Zoo, Pacific Science Center and the Seattle Art Museum. All Seattle and King County library branches were shuttered, as were Seattle’s waste transfer stations. Some COVID-19 testing sites closed, too.

Seattle library branches were scheduled to operate as usual Monday, “dependent on weather impacts,” according to a city update Sunday night.

The snow and icy roads forced Seattle Public Utilities to cancel residential and commercial garbage, recycling and food and yard waste pickup in Seattle on Monday. The utility said that contractors will attempt to serve priority commercial locations. Seattle Municipal Court and King County Superior Court will be closed, the courts said.

King County Metro switched its buses to snow routes Sunday, and Sound Transit did the same with several express bus routes. Metro suspended dial-a-ride and paratransit service, while Sound Transit canceled an express bus route between Northgate and Everett, complicating return trips for Snohomish County football fans after an afternoon Seahawks game in Seattle.



	<p>Amtrak trains experienced some weather-related delays, while waterborne travelers were also affected, as Washington State Ferries closed service Sunday afternoon between Coupeville and Port Townsend, due to staffing issues.</p> <p>In Seattle, work crews spent Sunday plowing and spreading salt on some of the city's most important streets, while others were left under snow.</p> <p>The Seattle Department of Transportation began pretreating roads Saturday and dispatched more than 35 vehicles to service about 1,200 miles of pavement, according to the city's Sunday night update. Busy arterials that connect neighborhoods are prioritized, while nonarterials aren't plowed.</p> <p>Metered street parking in Seattle will be free Monday, the department said, encouraging property owners and neighbors to clear sidewalks of snow.</p> <p>Nearly 3,000 customers in Seattle's Bitter Lake neighborhood lost power Sunday morning though Seattle City Light had their lights back on by noon. Hundreds of customers remained powerless in Whatcom, Snohomish and Jefferson counties Sunday afternoon, however.</p>
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HEADLINE	<b>12/26 World's Covid cases rise 13% in week</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.upi.com/Top_News/World-News/2021/12/26/Worlds-COVID-19-cases-rise-13-in-week-led-by-Britain-France-US/8451640527646/">https://www.upi.com/Top_News/World-News/2021/12/26/Worlds-COVID-19-cases-rise-13-in-week-led-by-Britain-France-US/8451640527646/</a>
GIST	<p>Dec. 26 (UPI) -- One month after the first <a href="#">COVID-19</a> Omicron variant was first reported in South Africa, cases have surged worldwide despite restrictions and vaccines though some nations haven't reported drastic increases.</p> <p>In one week, infections rose 13% with 5,145,488 for a total of 280,320,475 Sunday with many nations not reporting data on the day after Christmas. Deaths actually went down 10% or 43,144 for a toll of 5,416,625, according to <a href="#">Worldometers.info tracking</a>.</p> <p>Several nations set daily cases records in the past few days. On Saturday, France reported 104,611 cases. On Friday, marks were set in Britain at 122,186 and Italy 50,599 with those nations not reporting data on Christmas Day. Canada set a national record with 21,493 and then reported 11,306 Friday and 2,458 Saturday. Australia's record was 9,947 Saturday.</p> <p>Worldwide, cases hit a record 982,822 Thursday. On Saturday there was a total of 521,981 on Christmas Day and 385,808 Sunday.</p> <p>In the United States, 291,671 cases Monday were reported to the <a href="#">Centers for Disease Control and Prevention</a>, which is the most since the record 294,015 Jan. 8. The most recent infections are 243,817 posted on Thursday. The CDC lists the total as 51,574,787. <a href="#">Johns Hopkins</a> lists 52,280,854 and Worldometers.info at 53,222,424. They all lead the world.</p> <p>The U.S. also has the most deaths, 837,854, according to Worldometers.info.</p> <p>Some countries have been immune to the new strain despite record surges earlier in the year.</p> <p>In the past week, India's case declined 7% with them under 20,000 since the beginning of October and only 6,987 Sunday with the world record 414,188 in May. Indonesia was down 8% weekly with only 92 reported Sunday after a record 54,000 in July. And Brazil dropped 8% with 4,164 infections Saturday, compared with a record 115,041 in June.</p> <p>Travel restrictions, especially from African nations, have been in place.</p>

On the Christmas weekend, airlines blamed shortages of staff, including coronavirus illnesses, in cancellations of nearly 2,400 flights on Friday and more than 2,300 on Saturday. A total of 800 were in the United States.

Early studies in Scotland and England suggest that infections from the variant could be milder, meaning fewer hospitalizations. But hospitals are reporting an increase, including in the United States with [71,011 Sunday](#) though down from more than 100,000 during the Delta surge in the summer.

"When we have millions and millions and millions of people, all sick, all together at one time, it doesn't take a large percentage of those people to topple over the hospitals," Dr. Hallie Prescott, associate professor of internal medicine at the University of Michigan, [told The New York Times](#).

Much of the world's population has been vaccinated, though the Omicron variant appears to be more resistant to vaccines than other strains. Boosters are showing a greater impact.

In all, more than 8.95 billion doses have been administered, an increase of 240 million in one week with the world's population of 7.9 billion, [according to Bloomberg tracking](#).

Broken down by world regions, the United States and Canada have administered at least one dose to 74% of the population, followed by Latin America at 71%, Asia-Pacific 68%, Europe at 65%, Middle East 49% and Africa at 13%, according to [The New York Times tracking](#).

China, which has the world's largest population at 1.5 billion, had administered 2.6 billion doses, or about 88.6% of the population for one-shots, ahead of India at 1.4 billion and the world's second biggest population at 1.4 billion with a 61.0% rate, according to Bloomberg. The United States is third at 500 million and 72.7%.

In Europe, the total is 729.7 million vaccinated with a 73% one shot rate. In the European Union, it's 87.1% in Denmark, 84.8% in Spain, 81.3% in France, 79.7% in Italy, 77.2% in Netherlands, 73.9% in Germany. Britain, which has left the EU, has a 77.3% rate.

Russia is lagging the world in vaccination with 49.4% of its population with at least one dose of a domestic-produced vaccine, including Sputnik 5, according to tracking by Bloomberg.

Two other Eastern European nations have low vaccination rates: Ukraine at 34.9% and Romania at 40.9%. Poland's rate is 56.7%, Czech Republic's is 63.9% and Austria 74.3%.

Cases have been surging in Europe. They rose 8% with a world-high 2,800,041 one week after a 1% gain for 83,419,293, second only to Asia, but many nations on the continent are experiencing spikes. Deaths decreased 12% to a total of 1,509,283 in first place among continents.

Experiencing big weekly jumps in cases were Italy 62%, France 41%, Spain 35%, Denmark 26% and Britain 21%.

Britain reported the most cases in one week, 613,332, for a total of 11,891,292 in fourth place. France was second at 510,995 for 9,088,371 total in seventh.

Britain first surpassed 100,000 on Thursday with 119,557. Until the recent surge the record was 67,794 in early January. Sunday's cases were.

Britain's deaths are 147,857 in seventh, including 137 Friday, the most recent day of data. Britain reportedly was the first nation to report a death from Omicron 13 days ago.

[In the kingdom](#), Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland have placed curbs on the hospitality and leisure industry, brought back social distancing rules and put limits on gathering sizes.

Current Plan B rules for England include vaccination passes for certain events, face masks in more places and people urged to work from home if possible.

Boxing Day football matches in Scotland's premiership on Sunday were played in front of a maximum of 500 seated fans, and in Wales all large sporting events were without spectators.

[Hospitalizations](#) rose 8% over the week to 6,581.

Before the onset of Omicron, COVID-19 had already been at high levels in Russia, Germany, Ukraine and Poland.

On Sunday, Russia reported 968 deaths, with the record 1,254 on Nov. 19, for a total of 304,218 in fourth place, passing Mexico last week. And the nation added 23,721 cases for 10,392,020, in fifth place, including a record 41,335 on Nov. 6. Russia's deaths are down by 10% for a total of 7,70, which is second in the world behind the U.S., and a 9% drop in cases to 181,476.

Russia has exceeded 1,000 deaths every day since Oct. 16. Also, Russia hasn't been below 700 since July. Last year, deaths reached 635 on Dec. 24.

Germany is under a nationwide lockdown for the unvaccinated, including nonessential services. Large events are all banned.

Cases hit a record 76,132 on Nov. 25 in Germany. Until Nov. 4, the record was 32,546 on April 14. On Sunday, Germany reported 9,597 for a total of 7,009,073, which is eighth in the world.

Deaths declined 17% in one week to 2,189 after spiking for a few weeks. And cases declined 27%.

On Dec. 24, Germany reported 575 deaths, the most since 589 on Feb. 16. Sunday's gain was 51 for 111,076 in 14th. Deaths are nowhere near the record of 1,249 on Dec. 29.

In deaths elsewhere, Italy is ninth with 136,611, including 81 Sunday. In the top 20: France is 12th with 122,546, an increase of 84 Saturday; Ukraine 15th with 94,838, including 138 more Sunday; Poland 16th with 94,327, and Spain 18th with 89,019 and no data on weekends.

Eleven days ago France's cases increased 65,713, the most since a record 83,324 in November 2020. France posted 104,611 Saturday and 94,124 Friday. Sunday's rise was 27,697.

France's President [Emmanuel Macron](#) is [considering restrictions](#). On Monday, Macron will convene his health defense council Monday to discuss the coronavirus, including a system requiring people to be fully vaccinated to enter bars, restaurants and cultural venues.

More than 16,000 people are currently hospitalized for coronavirus in France.

In Italy, the record 54,762 cases Saturday surpassed the record of 41,198 in November 2020. Sunday's rise was 24,883.

[On Thursday](#), Italy's government approved stricter rules on health passes and masks. Outdoor public events and parties are banned during the festive season.

Although cases dropped 16% in Netherlands, the nation is on a lockdown through at least Jan. 14 with schools and colleges, all non-essential shops and cultural institutions shuttered.

In Denmark, new restrictions include capacity restrictions for stores and restaurants with a 26% weekly rise in cases.

In Asia over the past week, deaths increased by only 12 with a current 1,249,194 and cases were down 5% with 84,152,545.

India's deaths rose 14% to 2,260 eight weeks after a surge of 83%. Cases were down 7%.

On Sunday, India reported 162 fatalities for a total of 479,682 in third place.

Cases were 6,987 Feb. 3 among the lowest since 2,992 for a total of 34,786,802, in second worldwide.

India holds world daily records, not including major reconciliations: 6,148 deaths in June and 414,188 cases in May.

The nation's cases have been under 20,000 for 79 days in a row and below 50,000 for 182 consecutive days.

India, which is the prime manufacturer of vaccines for the world, has a one-shot rate for the entire population of 61% in a ramped-up effort.

With [422 Omicron cases](#) reported in 17 states and territories, the Union Health Ministry has asked states to ensure stringent implementation of COVID-19 protocols.

That includes a night curfew in Delhi. Also, all events or gatherings to celebrate Christmas or New Year are banned in the city. Since Dec. 15, all social, political, sports, entertainment, cultural and religious events are prohibited.

The pandemic began in late 2019 in Mainland China, but the nation's death toll has stood at 4,636 for several months and 82nd behind Zimbabwe at 4,885. China added 206 cases Sunday, the most since 325 in April 2020, three months after its peak.

Xi'an city, with a population of 13 million went into a [lockdown last week](#) with 140 cases in less than two weeks, mainly from the Delta variant.

South Korea's cases rose 5,418 Sunday, 6,234 Sunday after a record 7,843 on Dec. 15 with 2020's highest 1,237 on Dec. 25. South Korea added 69 deaths Sunday after a record 109 Thursday.

Public facilities, including restaurants and cafes, were added to businesses requiring proof of vaccination or a negative test for entry.

Korea Disease Control and Prevention Agency said [critically ill patients](#) rose to a new high of 1,063 on Tuesday.

South Korea will secure 10,000 additional hospital beds for COVID-19 patients in January for a total of 25,000.

South Korea's vaccination rate is 84.9%, after getting off to a late start.

Japan reported no deaths again Sunday and eight total in the past week with a total of 18,399.

And there were 263 cases Sunday compared with the record of 25,492 on Aug. 21 after the Summer Olympics ended on Aug. 8. On Nov. 22 there were only 50 cases.

Japan has a relatively low 13,753 infections per million and 146 deaths per million. Worldwide, it's 35,916 cases per million and 694.7 per million deaths. The United States' figures are 2,508 fatalities per million and 158,821 infections per million.

Japan, which administered its first vaccine doses two months after the United States, has vaccinated 79.5% of the 129.4 million population.

On Sunday, Vietnam reported 15,218 cases, less than the record 16,715 in August and 207 deaths. The deaths mark is 803 on Sept. 1.

Indonesia ranks eighth in the world at 144,055 with an increase of two deaths Sunday, way down from a record 2,069 on July 27. The Asian nation's cases are 14th at 4,261,759 including 164 Sunday, also a fraction of the record 54,000 in July. Indonesia has vaccinated 58.2% of its population with at least one dose.

Iran is 10th at 131,400 deaths, including 52 Sunday. Iran's one-shot vaccination rate is 71%, up from 43.6% 11 weeks ago.

Turkey is sixth in the world for cases at 9,307,124, including 20,138 reported Sunday and 19th in deaths at 81,576, including 173 most recently. Turkey has a 68.3% vaccination rate.

Israel's one-shot vaccination rate is 72%.

Israel has a death toll of 8,242 with one reported Sunday and 20 in the past week and 1,561 cases most recently with the record 20,523 on Sept. 1. Israel has among the world's worst infection rates: 146,240 per million.

After Omicron emerged in the nation, all foreign nationals were banned from coming into Israel.

[Last week](#), Israel agreed to ease travel restrictions to "red zone" countries for Israelis living abroad, allowing them to leave the country and return to their places of residence. The United States and Canada are in this zone.

The United States on Friday [eliminated travel bans](#) from South Africa and seven other nations on the continent. Like other travelers, they will be required to be fully vaccinated.

The United States was allowing entry to fully vaccinated foreign travelers from 33 nations, including by air and land. Travel for U.S. residents was allowed earlier.

Canada earlier ended its advisory against non-essential travel for vaccinated citizens. Canada reopened its border to vaccinated Americans in August.

In North America, the deaths are 1,235,193 with an 18% weekly decrease, and cases are 63,240,862, increasing 32%.

The United States' deaths decreased 18% and cases rose 30%. On Sunday, the United States reported 42 deaths and 96,384 cases though most states don't report data on weekends.

Mexico is fifth in the world in deaths at 298,777 with a 7% weekly decrease and 18 recorded Sunday. The nation's cases rose 13% with 803 most recently for 16th at 3,951,003.

Canada's cases rose 91% in one week, including 10,409 Sunday for 27th in cases with 1,980,908.

Canada's deaths went down 22% and the nation ranks 27th worldwide with 30,146 including three Sunday. The record is 257 on Dec. 29.

Canada has around one-third the rates per million than the United States with deaths 788 and cases 51,253.

Canada has the best one-shot vaccination rate of the three largest countries in North America at [82.7%](#). The United States is at 72.7% for one shot. Mexico's percentage is 64.2%, though it was the first Latin American nation to begin vaccinating people.

[In Quebec province](#), slightly more than 10,000 new cases were added Friday, passing the previous record of 9,397 new cases reported one day. Ontario reported 9,571 cases, surpassing the 5,790 the province posted on Thursday.

"The Omicron variant is more contagious than anything seen since the start of the pandemic," Premier François Legault wrote in a Christmas message posted to Facebook. "I count on your judgment to respect the instructions and to be careful."

[In Mexico](#), only 22 Omicron cases have been detected.

Of Mexico's 32 states, all are low-risk green on the federal government's coronavirus stoplight map except for Durango, Aguascalientes, Baja California, Sonora and Chihuahua at medium-risk yellow.

In South America, cases increased 38% in one week with a total of 39,474,519 and deaths also were down 18% to 1,190,674.

Brazil's deaths dropped 27% to 618,484 in second place overall, and down 8% in cases.

Brazil reported 27 deaths Sunday. Cases were 4,810, among the lowest since the start of the pandemic. The record was 115,0412 in June 20.

Also in the top 10 for deaths, Peru is sixth at 202,524. Colombia is 11th at 129,761, Argentina is 13th with 117,035 and Chile 22nd with 39,034.

On Sunday, Chile reported 21 more deaths while Peru added 36, Colombia 32 and Argentina 15. These numbers are way down from records: Peru with 1,154, Colombia with 754, Argentina with 791, Chile with 316.

Peru has the world's highest death rate at 6,017 per million people.

Some South American nations have high vaccinations rates. Chile has the best vaccination rate on the continent at 90% with Argentina 84.2%, Brazil at 78.9%, Colombia at 75.6% and Peru 72.6%.

With the variant emerging in Africa, the continent reported a 10% increase in cases one week after 52% increase with a total of 9,568,340, as deaths went up 3% for a total toll of 227,816.

South Africa's infections decreased 29% a week after a 49% gain and deaths were up 87%. The Omicron variant was first reported on Nov. 24.

Overall, South Africa has reported 3,407,937 cases, in 18th worldwide, with 5,603 Sunday. Fourteen days ago there was a record 37,875.

The nation is 17th in deaths at 90,814, including 41 most recently.

The situation is actually easing in South Africa and symptoms are generally less severe than other variants.

Hospitalizations and deaths are "significantly lower relative to that experienced in previous waves," Ridhwaan Suliman, senior researcher at the South African Council for Scientific and Industrial Research [told CNN last week](#).

He said South Africa has "surpassed the peak of the Omicron wave now, driven by the significant decline in the populous province and epicenter: Gauteng."



Tunisia has the second-most deaths with 25,423 head of Egypt with 21,608.

Oceania, with only 42.3 million people, has 4,450 deaths with a decrease of 10% in seven days and cases are 464,195 with a rise of 13%.

New Zealand's deaths remained at 49. Australia's toll increased to 2,190, with two reported Sunday and 44 in a week.

New Zealand added 70 cases Sunday after a record 222 Nov. 16. Australia was up 8,744 one day after a record 9,947. The most in 2020 at 714 in August.

New South Wales, which is Australia's most populous state, reported a record 6,394 new infections. Victoria, the country's second most populous state, added 1,608 new cases

The Omicron variant is responsible for more than 70% of cases in some Australian states.

"We would expect that pretty well everybody in New South Wales at some point will get Omicron," State Health Minister Brad Hazzard said Sunday. "If we're all going to get Omicron, the best way to face it is when we have full vaccinations including our booster."

Australia has a vaccination rate of 79.9% with New Zealand at 80.6% among the entire population.

In Australia, Victoria and New South Wales are no longer in lockdowns after months-long ones.

New Zealand is now on a traffic light system based on vaccinations with only a portion in the north in Red. Auckland earlier ended its 107-day lockdown for vaccinated people.

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HEADLINE	<b>12/26 China faces highest daily rise Covid cases</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.reuters.com/world/china/chinas-local-covid-case-count-driven-21-month-high-by-xian-outbreak-2021-12-26/">https://www.reuters.com/world/china/chinas-local-covid-case-count-driven-21-month-high-by-xian-outbreak-2021-12-26/</a>
GIST	<p>BEIJING, Dec 26 (Reuters) - China reported its highest daily rise in local COVID-19 cases in 21 months as infections more than doubled in the northwestern city of Xian, China's latest COVID hot spot.</p> <p>The city of 13 million, which entered its fourth day of lockdown, detected 155 domestically transmitted cases with confirmed symptoms for Saturday, up from 75 a day earlier, official data showed on Sunday.</p> <p>That drove the national daily count to 158, the highest since China managed to contain a nationwide outbreak in early 2020.</p> <p>Xian, with 485 local symptomatic cases reported for the Dec. 9-25 period, has imposed heavy-handed measures to rein in the outbreak, in line with Beijing's policy that any flare-up should be contained as soon as possible.</p> <p>The city managed to quickly detect those cases through three rounds of mass testing, He Wenquan, a Xian official, told a press conference on Sunday, adding that high case numbers could persist into the next couple of days.</p> <p>"In order to quickly screen out the infected groups of people, after an analysis by experts, we will step up control measures in key areas, especially places with greater risk level," said He.</p> <p>The local government also announced that it would launch a city-wide disinfection campaign from 18:00 local time, urging residents to shut the windows and bring clothes or other items inside from their balconies.</p>

	<p>Residents may not leave town without approval from employers or local authorities and multiple rounds of mass testing were conducted to identify cases.</p> <p>The city has announced no infections caused by the Omicron variant, although Chinese authorities have reported a handful of Omicron infections among international travellers and in southern China.</p> <p>Including imported cases, mainland China confirmed 206 new cases on Dec. 25, up from 140 a day earlier.</p> <p>No new deaths were reported, leaving the cumulative death toll at 4,636. Mainland China had 101,077 confirmed cases as of Dec. 25.</p>
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HEADLINE	<b>12/26 Coronavirus persist for months in body</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.msn.com/en-us/money/other/coronavirus-can-persist-for-months-after-traversing-body/ar-AAS9pry?ocid=uxbndlbing">https://www.msn.com/en-us/money/other/coronavirus-can-persist-for-months-after-traversing-body/ar-AAS9pry?ocid=uxbndlbing</a>
GIST	<p>(Bloomberg) -- The coronavirus that causes Covid-19 can spread within days from the airways to the heart, brain and almost every organ system in the body, where it may persist for months, a study found.</p> <p>In what they describe as the most comprehensive analysis to date of the SARS-CoV-2 virus's distribution and persistence in the body and brain, scientists at the U.S. National Institutes of Health said they found the pathogen is capable of replicating in human cells well beyond the respiratory tract.</p> <p>The results, released online Saturday in a <a href="#">manuscript</a> under review for publication in the journal Nature, point to delayed viral clearance as a potential contributor to the persistent symptoms wracking so-called <a href="#">long Covid</a> sufferers. Understanding the mechanisms by which the virus persists, along with the body's response to any viral reservoir, promises to help improve care for those afflicted, the authors said.</p> <p>"This is remarkably important work," said <a href="#">Ziyad Al-Aly</a>, director of the clinical epidemiology center at the Veterans Affairs St. Louis Health Care System in Missouri, who has led separate studies into the <a href="#">long-term effects</a> of Covid-19. "For a long time now, we have been scratching our heads and asking why long Covid seems to affect so many organ systems. This paper sheds some light, and may help explain why long Covid can occur even in people who had mild or asymptomatic acute disease."</p> <p>The findings and the techniques haven't yet been reviewed by independent scientists, and mostly relate to data gathered from fatal Covid cases, not patients with long Covid or "<a href="#">post-acute sequelae of SARS-CoV-2</a>," as it's also called.</p> <p><b>Contentious Findings</b></p> <p>The coronavirus's propensity to infect cells outside the airways and lungs is contested, with numerous studies providing evidence for and against the possibility.</p> <p>The research undertaken at the NIH in Bethesda, Maryland, is based on extensive sampling and analysis of tissues taken during autopsies on 44 patients who died after contracting the coronavirus during the first year of the pandemic in the U.S.</p> <p>The burden of infection outside the respiratory tract and the time taken to clear the from virus from infected tissues aren't well characterized, particularly in the <a href="#">brain</a>, wrote <a href="#">Daniel Chertow</a>, who runs the NIH's emerging pathogens section, and his colleagues.</p> <p>The group detected persistent SARS-CoV-2 RNA in multiple parts of the body, including regions throughout the brain, for as long as 230 days following symptom onset. This may represent infection with defective virus particles, which has been described in persistent infection with the <a href="#">measles virus</a>, they said.</p>

“We don’t fully understand long Covid, but these changes could explain ongoing symptoms,” said Raina MacIntyre, professor of global biosecurity at the University of New South Wales in Sydney. MacIntyre wasn’t involved with the research, which she said “provides a warning about being blasé about mass infection in children and adults.”

### **Precautionary Approach**

“We don’t yet know what burden of chronic illness will result in years to come,” she said. “Will we see young-onset cardiac failure in survivors, or early onset [dementia](#)? These are unanswered questions which call for a precautionary public health approach to mitigation of the spread of this virus.”

In contrast to other Covid autopsy research, the NIH team’s post-mortem tissue collection was more comprehensive and typically occurred within about a day of the patient’s death.

The researchers also used a variety of tissue preservation techniques to detect and quantify viral levels, as well as grow the virus collected from multiple tissues, including lung, heart, small intestine and adrenal gland from deceased Covid patients during their first week of illness.

“Our results collectively show that while the highest burden of SARS-CoV-2 is in the airways and lung, the virus can disseminate early during infection and infect cells throughout the entire body, including widely throughout the brain,” the authors said.

The study provides pathologic data that support findings of previous research showing, for example, that SARS-CoV-2 directly kills [heart muscle cells](#), and that those who survive an infection suffer [cognitive deficits](#), said MacIntyre at the University of New South Wales.

### **‘Viremic’ Phase**

The N.I.H. researchers posit that infection of the pulmonary system may result in an early “viremic” phase, in which the virus is present in the bloodstream and is seeded throughout the body, including across the blood-brain barrier, even in patients experiencing mild or no symptoms. One patient in the autopsy study was a juvenile who likely died from unrelated seizure complications, suggesting infected children without severe Covid-19 can also experience systemic infection, they said.

The less-efficient viral clearance in tissues outside the pulmonary system may be related to a weak immune response outside the respiratory tract, the authors said.

SARS-CoV-2 RNA was detected in the [brains](#) of all six autopsy patients who died more than a month after developing symptoms, and across most locations evaluated in the brain in five, including one patient who died 230 days after symptom onset.

The focus on multiple brain areas is especially helpful, said Al-Aly at the Veterans Affairs St. Louis Health Care System.

“It can help us understand the neurocognitive decline or ‘brain fog’ and other neuropsychiatric manifestations of long Covid,” he said. “We need to start thinking of SARS-CoV-2 as a systemic virus that may clear in some people, but in others may persist for weeks or months and produce long Covid -- a multifaceted systemic disorder.”

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HEADLINE	12/26 Omicron pushing US into soft lockdown
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.msn.com/en-us/money/markets/omicron-is-pushing-america-into-soft-lockdown/ar-AAS9zNI">https://www.msn.com/en-us/money/markets/omicron-is-pushing-america-into-soft-lockdown/ar-AAS9zNI</a>
GIST	“I do not see a scenario for any kind of shutdown,” New York City Mayor Bill de Blasio <a href="#">declared this week</a> , as parts of New York were in fact shutting down all around him. Broadway <a href="#">canceled show after show</a> . Restaurants <a href="#">closed their kitchens</a> . De Blasio’s successor, Eric Adams, who will take office January 1, <a href="#">nixed his inauguration gala</a> . There has been no March 2020–style universal shutdown, but New York is not back anymore, baby.

For Brent Young, who runs a butcher shop and two restaurants in Brooklyn, it began last week when, one by one, staff members tested positive. “It’s more or less decimated our workforce,” he says. One of his restaurants had been booked solid with parties for a week—the holidays are one of the busiest times of the year for restaurants—but people started canceling those parties too. At this point it’s not worth trying to stay open, Young says, “because the anxiety’s so high no one’s wanting to eat.” For most vaccinated people, Omicron will be mild. But even a mild cold, sufficiently widespread, can disrupt a city.

A voluntary suspension of activity—a soft lockdown, essentially—will help dampen transmission of the coronavirus. This happened all over the country in spring 2020, when people began staying at home before official stay-at-home orders came down, says Saad Omer, an epidemiologist at Yale and a co-author of a [paper](#) that studied the phenomenon using anonymized cellphone data. It’s intuitive, really. “Things become more salient; you react on that,” Omer says. This feedback loop, which conventional epidemiological models entirely ignore, can help determine the shape and duration of the Omicron wave—but exactly how is hard to predict.

The classic “[epi curve](#)” shows cases rising exponentially until so many people are immune that the spread of the virus has to slow. Then cases fall exponentially. But if soft lockdowns help suppress that viral spread, then cases will drop off sooner, while many people are still susceptible. In other words, “when you see a peak and see it go down, it doesn’t mean the risk has abated,” says Joshua Weitz, who studies viral dynamics at Georgia Tech. According to [work by Weitz and his colleagues](#), this helps explain why COVID cases have peaked and plateaued multiple times over the course of the pandemic. Those peaks also tend to be asymmetrical, with steeper rises than falls. This too may be related to behavior: People might become more careful when they see an initial surge in cases but let their guard down when pandemic fatigue sets in. Just as our voluntary actions can act as a brake on rising cases, they can also slow a wave’s decline. Omicron is surging at a time when Americans are [already weary of the pandemic](#), so this soft lockdown may not last very long. And in communities where people are very over COVID, it may not happen at all.

Predicting how humans behave has been one of the biggest challenges of the pandemic. It’s easier to look at the impact of official policies that have start and end dates, like last year’s school or business closures. Now the shutdowns are much more of a patchwork, with some businesses closing and some events canceled, says Micaela Martinez, an infectious-disease ecologist at Emory University. Case trends will be hard to interpret over the next few weeks. In London, where the Omicron-fueled growth of cases already seems to be slowing, a number of factors may be at the root: [behavior changes](#), [maxed-out testing capacity](#), or the virus running into a wall of immunity.

Whatever the effect of a soft lockdown on the spread of Omicron, it will affect the economy too. Even if customers remain willing to go out, businesses will have to close when too many employees end up sick or get stuck in quarantine. It’s why the NHL [canceled its games through Christmas](#) and why several museums in London [have closed their doors](#). Shortening isolation periods in light of Omicron might help minimize these disruptions. The U.K. is now allowing sick people to [test out of isolation](#) at day seven, and the [U.S. is considering](#) a shorter period for [vaccinated people with breakthrough cases](#).

In a soft lockdown, businesses are also on their own. Last spring’s stay-at-home orders came with unemployment assistance and emergency loans. None of that is coming this time. “All of the decision making is put on the small-business owners,” Young says. He’ll have to shoulder the cost of closing his businesses, and then just hope they can reopen soon. In the meantime, he says, he’s buying all the rapid tests he can.

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HEADLINE	12/26 Christmas cruises ‘sailing on a petri dish’
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.washingtonpost.com/travel/2021/12/25/christmas-cruises-covid/">https://www.washingtonpost.com/travel/2021/12/25/christmas-cruises-covid/</a>
GIST	Ashley Peterson had a different mental image of her Christmas break than what actually transpired: The 34-year-old thought she would finally visit the Caribbean reef-lined island of Bonaire, the 99th destination in her quest to travel to at least 100 countries.

Instead, her cruise ship, the Carnival Freedom, sailed past its destination Wednesday after a port turned away the boat because of coronavirus infections onboard. At least six sailings on Royal Caribbean, Holland America, Carnival and others last week were altered by coronavirus outbreaks as cruise ships prepared for pre-pandemic levels before sailings were paused. Although vessels that have resumed cruising have beefed up coronavirus precautions — requiring vaccinations and testing passengers — the wave of new infections, fueled by the quickly proliferating omicron variant, has knocked [the devastated industry](#) and alarmed cruisers.

“We’re sailing on a petri dish,” Peterson said. “I feel like I just spent my past week at a superspreader event.”

Carnival did not respond to a question from The Washington Post about how many people have tested positive on the ship that was denied entry to Bonaire and Aruba, but it said “a small number of people infected aboard the Freedom ship have been isolated from other passengers and crew.” The ship, which ported in Miami on Sunday for another sailing, had 2,497 passengers and 1,112 crew members on board.

The cruise company said it is working with the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and local health authorities at its destinations to determine where its boats can travel and seek alternative destinations.

“The rapid spread of the Omicron Variant may shape how some destination authorities view even a small number of cases, even when they are being managed with our vigorous protocols,” according to the company’s statement. “Some destinations have limited medical resources and are focused on managing their own local response to the variant.”

The ship is among dozens [under investigation or being monitored](#) by the CDC.

Some cruise companies have said they will alter rules in response to the rise in cases. Royal Caribbean announced it will not be accepting new bookings until Jan. 10 after dozens of people tested positive on Royal Caribbean’s [Odyssey of the Seas](#) and [Symphony of the Seas](#), based in Florida. The ships have experienced a surge in cases over the past week at a greater average rate [than the United States overall](#). The Odyssey of the Seas, turned away from Curaçao and Aruba, returned to Fort Lauderdale on Sunday.

In the busiest time for travel in nearly two years, the omicron variant has [brought about staffing problems](#) that have contributed to [flight cancellations](#), upending [people’s get-togethers](#) and [leading people to isolate or quarantine](#).

Peterson and four other Carnival Freedom passengers who spoke to The Washington Post spent much of their Christmastime avoiding public areas of their ship, unsure of how many people have tested positive or unwittingly spread the virus. One passenger from a recent voyage on the same ship — who isolated in a hotel in Miami because he tested positive the day after the cruise — told The Post that his six-day Caribbean vacation has become a month-long ordeal because he cannot travel home to Canada.

Sitting in her stateroom on Christmas Day, Peterson paused to listen to a ship-wide announcement, wondering whether it would answer the questions she has about the infections onboard her ship.

“Oh, they’re just talking about the weather,” she said. “They come on every day; you think they’re going to tell us something about covid, and it’s, ‘We’re passing by this island and the weather is 82 degrees.’ ”

Cruises, which for some can be idyllic sojourns, have borne a nightmarish side of the pandemic, beginning when people on ships at the start of the pandemic spent days at sea when port after port denied them permission to dock.

As the pandemic approaches its third year, cruises are embarking with precautions.

The mitigation measures in place aboard Holland America Line's ship, the Koningsdam, were "as good as it gets," according to Paulette York, who was a passenger on the voyage that left San Diego for Mexico on Dec. 19. However, after 21 crew members tested positive, the boat was turned away from Mexico's Puerto Vallarta.

York, of La Quinta, Calif., said that passengers had complied with mask requirements and tested negative, and she expressed frustration that port authorities did not allow the ship in. Still, the retiree said she enjoyed other parts of the cruise, visiting Cabo San Lucas and Mazatlán, and watching a pod of dolphins.

"Holland America is doing everything to keep us all safe," York wrote in a message Saturday, the day before the ship returned to San Diego.

Travel vlogger Austin Hamawy said he expects cruises to be better prepared for a coronavirus resurgence after months of preparation.

Boarding the MSC Seashore, which reported 28 cases among 4,714 guests and crew, Hamawy noticed people were standing close to one another for long periods. He recorded a TikTok video to document the crowd gathering at the ship's public areas.

"The elevators are full, the Jacuzzis are full, the swimming pools are full, the theaters are full, the dining rooms are full," he said in an interview. "Everywhere you go there's a lot of people. And it's very difficult to avoid that on a cruise ship."

The company said the MSC Seashore was not anywhere near capacity during her previous cruises. "We had a total of 4,714 guests and crew members on board, compared with a maximum total capacity of 7,280 persons," the company said in a statement.

Two days after the boat disembarked Thursday, Hamawy said he felt some symptoms of covid-19: a sore throat and a high temperature. On Christmas, he quarantined at home in Fort Lauderdale, Fla.

"We have an extended family, and we're all planning a big celebration, and that came to a grinding halt," he said.

Canadian resident Brian Curtis, who disembarked the Carnival Freedom the same day Peterson boarded in Miami, also did not make it to a family Christmas gathering. The day after getting off the ship, he tested positive, extending the trip with his wife and 18-month-old daughter two weeks more than they had planned. The 34-year-old will end up paying an additional \$3,000 to \$4,000 to wait out his family's isolation in Miami, he said.

Curtis canceled his next scheduled cruise in January, saying he wants masking and hand-washing to improve on ships before he cruises again.

"We thought it would be safe by now, but obviously it's not where it needs to be," he said. "I wouldn't want to travel on a cruise anytime soon."

The infections on Curtis's trip, including the one he discovered after the voyage ended, were not disclosed to passengers on the ship's next trip.

Carnival Freedom passenger Angie Jones, 39, said that if she had known about the cases from that previous voyage — Curtis's trip — she would have canceled.

Time on the ship with her husband, her children and her sister's family has mostly been confined to their rooms since news of the outbreak that prevented the ship from visiting Bonaire and Aruba. She said they have stopped going to the theater for performances to avoid crowds — though she said there were fewer shows since the outbreak.



	"Just the fear of the unknown also has ruined our Christmas cruise in so many ways," Jones wrote in a message.
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HEADLINE	<b>12/26 Military cracks down 'questionable tattoos'</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.chronline.com/stories/military-is-cracking-down-on-questionable-tattoos-to-combat-extremism,281485?">https://www.chronline.com/stories/military-is-cracking-down-on-questionable-tattoos-to-combat-extremism,281485?</a>
GIST	<p>The U.S. Department of Defense has updated its screening process for new recruits to include questions about membership in extremist organizations and any "questionable tattoos" that might suggest affiliation with those groups.</p> <p>In a 21-page report detailing the Pentagon's plan to root out extremism within its ranks, the defense department spelled out efforts to ensure "only the best qualified recruits are selected for services." The report was spurred in large part by the Jan. 6 attack on the Capitol — which included some retired and active-duty service members.</p> <p>Defense Secretary Lloyd J. Austin III said the "overwhelming majority" serve with "honor and integrity."</p> <p>"We owe the men and women of the Department of Defense an environment free of extremist activities, and we owe our country a military that reflects the founding values of our democracy," he said in a Dec. 20 news release.</p> <p>The report listed four action items completed by the Pentagon since April and an additional three recommendations moving forward. It includes a broadened definition of extremist activities, which now accounts for social media and other online behavior, as well as better training for service members leaving the military who may be recruited by supremacist organizations.</p> <p>While the defense department didn't list specific organizations that would be considered extremist, the agency identified six behaviors that constitute "extremist activities" as well as 14 examples of what constitutes "active participation" in those activities.</p> <p>Knowingly displaying any sort of paraphernalia, words or symbols that support extremism or groups that are vocal proponents of extremist ideology is considered "active participation" under the new guidelines. According to the Pentagon, that includes "flags, clothing, tattoos and bumper stickers" on or off a military installation.</p> <p>Officials also took a closer look at the screening process for new recruits, citing "several tragic incidents involving people with access to Department of Defense installations."</p> <p>The report mentions shootings at Fort Hood in 2009 and the Washington Navy Yard in 2013, both of which were carried out by current or former service members.</p> <p>Defense department officials outlined new efforts to ferret out recruits with potentially dangerous extremist ideologies, starting with updating screening questionnaires to include specific questions about whether recruits have joined "racially biased entities and other extremist groups."</p> <p>The forms will notify recruits that any involvement in criminal gangs or extremist organizations is forbidden.</p> <p>Recruiters and the Military Criminal Investigative Organizations also now have access to an FBI portal with "information on local gangs, white-supremacy and nationalist groups, gang signs, and extremist symbols and tattoos," the report states. Officials said the portal will allow recruiters and investigators to better assess "questionable tattoos and branding that suggest propensities to extremism and violence."</p>

If a recruit either attests to being a member of an extremist organization or has a tattoo that's been flagged by the FBI, senior leadership will have to issue what's known as a "Morals Eligibility Determination" that allows them to move forward in the application process, the defense department said.

During a background briefing, a senior defense official outlined the screening process for applicants, which includes a recruiter interview, a look at their criminal history or past involvement with law enforcement, fingerprinting and an FBI name check.

"We look at that and the city, county, and state of residence at the time of enlistment," the official said. "We also look for any offensive, racist, supremacist tattoos, including those that may reflect gang affiliation. Then we have a robust partnership with the FBI Cryptology and Racketeering Records Unit to be able to look at symbology as it may be evolving across the United States because, again, that's one of the things that we found is that this changes so quickly and it can vary a lot region-to-region, state-by-state."

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HEADLINE	<b>12/26 Fauci warns against omicron complacency</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.nytimes.com/live/2021/12/26/world/omicron-covid-vaccine-tests#fauci-omicron">https://www.nytimes.com/live/2021/12/26/world/omicron-covid-vaccine-tests#fauci-omicron</a>
GIST	<p>Dr. Anthony S. Fauci, the nation's top infectious disease expert, said a growing body of evidence suggested that the Omicron variant of the coronavirus was causing less serious illness than its predecessors but he warned against complacency, saying the variant's lightning-speed spread across the United States would likely lead to a perilous spike in hospitalizations among the unvaccinated and could overwhelm the country's health systems.</p> <p>Speaking on ABC's "This Week" on Sunday, Dr. Fauci said recent data out of Scotland, England and South Africa has been filling in the fragmentary portrait of Omicron, which has spread across much of the world and overtaken the Delta variant in the United States in the month since it was first identified by scientists in South Africa.</p> <p>"Even though we're pleased by the evidence from multiple countries — it looks like there is a lesser degree of severity — we've got to be careful that we don't get complacent about that," Dr. Fauci said, noting that there were still tens of millions of unvaccinated Americans. "Those are the most vulnerable ones when you have a virus that is extraordinarily effective in getting to people and infecting them the way Omicron is."</p> <p>Last week, scientists at the University of Edinburgh in Scotland reported that people infected with Omicron were almost 60 percent less likely to be hospitalized than those infected with Delta. Another study from Imperial College London found that individuals infected by Omicron were 15 to 20 percent less likely to go to an emergency room with severe symptoms and 40 percent less likely to be hospitalized.</p> <p>Despite such encouraging data, Dr. Fauci said the nation's low vaccination rate — only 62 percent of Americans are fully vaccinated — would likely dilute the benefits of Omicron's reduced virulence. "When you have such a high volume of new infections, it might override a real diminution in severity," he said.</p> <p>Nearly 71,000 Americans are hospitalized with Covid-19, up 10 percent from the previous week but still well below previous peaks.</p> <p>That said, the nation's medical infrastructure is dangerously frayed two years into the pandemic as hospitals contend with staff shortages fueled by burnout and early retirements. Experts also worry about a coming wave of Omicron infections that could sideline an untold number of nurses and doctors.</p> <p>Despite an alarming spike of cases in the United States — the seven-day average of new daily cases has surpassed 197,000, a 65 percent jump over the last 14 days — government data show that vaccination is still a strong protector against severe illness. Unvaccinated people are five times more likely to test</p>

	positive and 14 times more likely to die of Covid than vaccinated patients, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.
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HEADLINE	<b>12/26 Holiday sales soar; e-commerce gains</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.nytimes.com/live/2021/12/26/world/omicron-covid-vaccine-tests#holiday-sales-data">https://www.nytimes.com/live/2021/12/26/world/omicron-covid-vaccine-tests#holiday-sales-data</a>
GIST	<p>Retail sales in the United States jumped nearly 11 percent this season compared with the holiday period in 2019, the year before the pandemic upended the global economy, according to a report Mastercard published on Sunday.</p> <p>The report, <a href="#">Mastercard SpendingPulse</a>, showed an 8.5 percent increase in retail sales over the holiday season, defined as Nov. 1 to Dec. 24, compared with last year. The figures exclude automobile sales.</p> <p>Sales in stores were up 8.1 percent compared with last year, while e-commerce sales were up 11 percent. Compared with 2019, before the pandemic brought about an <a href="#">explosion of online ordering</a>, e-commerce sales jumped over 61 percent.</p> <p>Online sales made up 20.9 percent of all retail sales this year, according to the Mastercard report. In 2019, online sales accounted for just 14.6 percent of all retail sales, underscoring how the pandemic has accelerated the shift to e-commerce.</p> <p>In a statement, Steve Sadove, senior adviser for Mastercard, said many Americans got their Christmas shopping done early this year. “Shoppers were eager to secure their gifts ahead of the retail rush,” he said, “with conversations surrounding supply chain and labor supply issues sending consumers online and to stores in droves.”</p> <p>Indeed, despite early fears, holiday shoppers <a href="#">received their gifts mostly on time</a>, with many shopping early and in person. Retailers, as well, placed merchandise orders early and tried to head off other bottlenecks. For their part, delivery companies ramped up hiring to handle the deluge of packages, which crushed the <a href="#">Postal Service last year</a>. Nearly all packages delivered this year by UPS, FedEx and the Postal Service arrived on time or with minimal delays, according to ShipMatrix.</p> <p>While the holiday period starts on Nov. 1 according to the Mastercard accounting, Thanksgiving weekend, the traditional start to holiday shopping, was crucial for retailers. Black Friday, Mastercard noted, was the top day for spending during the holiday season, and spending for the entire long weekend was up 14 percent compared with last year.</p>
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HEADLINE	<b>12/26 Covid cases spike; hospitalizations rise</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.nytimes.com/live/2021/12/26/world/omicron-covid-vaccine-tests#us-coronavirus-cases-spike-pushing-up-hospitalizations">https://www.nytimes.com/live/2021/12/26/world/omicron-covid-vaccine-tests#us-coronavirus-cases-spike-pushing-up-hospitalizations</a>
GIST	<p>The highly transmissible Omicron virus variant is sending daily U.S. caseloads soaring to levels higher than last year’s winter pandemic peak.</p> <p>Hospitalizations are starting to tick up, too, although not at the same rate as cases. It is unclear if they will continue to follow the rise in cases, especially given evidence in South Africa and Europe that Omicron may cause fewer severe cases of Covid.</p> <p>On Friday, before holiday interruptions to data reporting began to affect the nation’s daily case totals, the seven-day national average of new daily cases surpassed 197,000, a 65 percent jump over the last 14 days, and hospitalizations reached a seven-day average of more than 70,000, an increase of 10 percent. Deaths also increased by 3 percent during that time, to a seven-day average of 1,345, <a href="#">according to a New York Times database</a>.</p>

The national all-time high for average daily cases is 251,232, set in January during a post-holiday surge.

On Sunday, Dr. Anthony S. Fauci, the nation's top infectious disease expert, said a growing body of evidence suggested that Omicron was causing less serious illness than its predecessors. But he warned against complacency, saying the variant's lightning-speed spread across the United States would likely lead to a perilous spike in hospitalizations among the unvaccinated and could overwhelm the country's health systems.

"When you have such a high volume of new infections, it might override a real diminution in severity," Dr. Fauci said during an interview on ABC's "This Week."

In New York, Gov. Kathy Hochul [declared a state of emergency](#) earlier this month and put elective surgeries on pause at many hospitals. This week, Gov. Charlie Baker of Massachusetts [said he would activate up to 500 members of the National Guard](#) to help in overburdened hospitals. Many other states have done the same.

From Dec. 5, there has been a fourfold increase of Covid hospital admissions among children in New York City, where the Omicron variant is spreading rapidly, the New York State Department of Health said [in an advisory](#) on Friday. About half were under the age of 5, and not eligible for vaccination. The city did not provide numbers, but state data showed a few dozen children under 5 were hospitalized across the state as of Thursday.

The jump in pediatric cases is evident in other states as well. [The American Academy of Pediatrics reported last week](#) that Covid cases were "extremely high" among those under 18 across the country. Citing data as of Dec. 16, the academy said that cases among those under 18 had risen by 170,000 from the prior week, an increase of nearly 28 percent since early December. Pediatric cases are higher than ever before in the Northeast and Midwest, the data show, and all regions of the country have significantly more such cases since schools reopened for in-person instruction in the fall.

Even with the rising cases, government data show that vaccination is still a strong protector against severe illness. Unvaccinated people are five times more likely to test positive and 14 times more likely to die of Covid than vaccinated patients, [according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#).

Promising data out of South Africa and other European countries have also shown that [Omicron surges have been milder](#) and with fewer hospitalizations.

The new research is heartening, but experts warn that the surge coming to many countries still may flood hospitals.

"Each place has its own demographics and health care system access and, you know, vaccine distribution," Akiko Iwasaki, an immunologist and researcher at the Yale School of Medicine, said in an interview on Saturday. She added that people in England, Scotland and South Africa could have acquired enough immunity from other infections to be able to deal with this variant, or that there could be intrinsic differences in the pathogenicity of Omicron that results in fewer people needing to be hospitalized.

"We cannot assume the same things will happen to the U.S.," Dr. Iwasaki said. "That is not a reason to relax our measures here, and we still need to vaccinate those pockets of people who are unvaccinated."

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HEADLINE	12/26 Strong winter storm batters the Northwest
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.nytimes.com/2021/12/25/us/weather-seattle-portland.html">https://www.nytimes.com/2021/12/25/us/weather-seattle-portland.html</a>
GIST	Strong winds and whiteout conditions contributed to a <a href="#">20-car pileup</a> and other crashes in western Nevada on Sunday after a winter storm slammed into the Northwest over the holiday weekend.

At least six people were injured, including one driver who [crashed into](#) the back of a Nevada highway patrol vehicle that had its emergency lights on while a trooper was helping a stranded driver. The trooper was unhurt.

The crashes led officials to shut down Interstate 580 in Washoe Valley, Nev., in both directions. “If you do not need to be out and about today,” the Washoe County Sheriff’s Office [told drivers](#), “please stay home.”

Officials in Washoe County said on Saturday that dozens of vehicles were parked on one highway as the storm created poor driving conditions with [low visibility](#).

Another eight to 10 hours of snow showers were expected near Portland, Ore., the National Weather Service office there [said on Sunday](#). About six inches of snow were [recorded in Forest Grove, Ore.](#), about 27 miles west of Portland.

Gerald Macke, a meteorological technician with the Weather Service office in Portland, said the area just north of Salem got about four to seven inches of snow. But snowfall in the Portland metro area was uneven. Some areas got trace amounts, while others got up to six inches, he said.

Heavy snow was expected in the western mountain ranges, including the Sierra Nevada mountain range and the Cascades, according to the Weather Prediction Center of the National Weather Service.

The Sierra Nevada area, which already received “several feet of snow” recently, is expected to get up to five feet of snow through Tuesday, [the agency said](#). It added that “measurable and disruptive snowfall accumulations are also on tap again in the Pacific Northwest,” including the Portland and Seattle metro areas.

The Seattle-Tacoma International Airport [said on Sunday](#) that anti-icing and snow removal efforts there had led to delays of about an hour.

The Pacific Northwest was also bracing for an unusual cold snap.

The Weather Service said temperatures in Washington and Oregon could drop to single digits this week. The agency advised that the most vulnerable populations, including homeless people and those without access to heating, would be especially at risk.

Kate Brown, the governor of Oregon, on Thursday declared a state of emergency to last through Jan. 3 because of the forecast.

“Our state has experienced a number of climate-related emergencies this year, and with another coming, I urge all Oregonians to make a plan with your family now and be prepared,” she said.

The Emergency Management Division of the Washington State Military Department [advised people](#) to prepare for the storms by limiting their time outdoors, staying off the roads and dressing warmly.

The cold weather in the northwest contrasted with conditions in much of the United States, where record-breaking high temperatures were recorded at the end of the week.

In Wichita Falls, Texas, near the state’s border with Oklahoma, the temperature on Friday reached 91 degrees, [breaking the previous December record of 88 degrees set in 1954](#).

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HEADLINE	12/26 China replaces Communist party official
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/dec/26/china-replaces-xinjiang-party-boss-associated-uyghur-crackdown">https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/dec/26/china-replaces-xinjiang-party-boss-associated-uyghur-crackdown</a>

GIST	<p>China has replaced the Communist party official widely associated with a security crackdown targeting ethnic Uyghurs and other Muslims in the far-west region of <a href="#">Xinjiang</a>.</p> <p>The state-owned Xinhua news agency said in a brief announcement on Saturday that Ma Xingrui, the governor of the coastal economic powerhouse Guangdong province since 2017, had replaced Chen Quanguo as the Xinjiang party chief. Chen will move to another role.</p> <p>The change came amid a wider reshuffle ahead of next year's 20th party congress, scheduled for the autumn. It is not clear whether the move signals a rethink in China's overall approach to Xinjiang. Beijing would be sensitive to any interpretation that it was bowing to international pressure.</p> <p>Some Chinese observers have noted Chen may be promoted further during the party congress. Others say his replacement, Ma, may focus more on the region's economic development.</p> <p>Chen, 66, was appointed party secretary of Xinjiang in 2016. He is one of the 25 members of China's politburo and was placed on <a href="#">a sanctions list last year</a> by the US.</p> <p>On Thursday, Joe Biden signed into law a ban on imports from Xinjiang over Washington's concerns about forced labour. Beijing condemned the move.</p> <p>Rights groups and the United Nations say about 1 million Uyghurs and other Muslims <a href="#">have been detained</a> in re-education camps in Xinjiang in the name of combating religious extremism and terrorism.</p> <p>Since 2017, Beijing's policy in the province has faced fierce criticism from abroad. Some western lawmakers and parliamentarians have described China's treatment of the Uyghurs as genocidal – a charge Beijing denies. There have also been calls for a boycott of the <a href="#">Beijing Winter Olympics</a> in February.</p> <p>Chen's replacement, 62-year-old Ma, has a background in the aerospace industry. Before becoming governor of Guangdong he served as the party boss in Shenzhen from 2015.</p>
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HEADLINE	<b>12/26 Bleak new year or beginning of the end?</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/dec/26/omicron-bleak-new-year-or-beginning-of-the-end-for-the-pandemic">https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/dec/26/omicron-bleak-new-year-or-beginning-of-the-end-for-the-pandemic</a>
GIST	<p>Once again, Britain is experiencing a festive season hit by waves of Covid-19 infections. Last year, Christmas and the new year were spoiled by the appearance of the Alpha variant. This time, it is Omicron that has sent case numbers soaring. Christmas cancellations have swept through Britain's restaurants, pubs and clubs and left the country on the brink of another bleak New Year as the NHS warns once more that it is facing the <a href="#">threat of being overwhelmed</a> by spiralling numbers of seriously ill patients.</p> <p>The scenario has raised fears that this now represents the shape of Christmases to come. Social restrictions and lockdown threats could become our normal festive fare.</p> <p>It is a dispiriting prospect. But is it realistic? Are we justified in drawing close parallels between this Christmas and last year's? These are key questions because, in trying to answer them, we may also find clues to the likely path of the entire pandemic.</p> <p><b>How close does this year's outbreak parallel that of last winter?</b></p> <p>At first glance, the two years look strikingly similar, with case numbers rocketing in only a few weeks in the UK. However, hospitalisations and deaths from Covid-19 remain very low so far this year, with latest research suggesting that the new variant appears to trigger fewer cases of severe illness than its viral predecessors.</p>



Scientists have generally treated these results studies as good news but have also counselled caution. Daily Covid-19 case numbers are still rising – they reached [a record 122,000 on Friday](#) – and it was estimated that 1.7 million people had Covid-19 in the UK last week.

### **Are there noticeable differences in the ages of those affected by Omicron?**

Crucially, most of the new cases have occurred in young adults, which has led some researchers to warn that if Omicron starts to affect older – more vulnerable – people in greater numbers, hospitalisations could still jump. On the other hand, a huge number of people – especially the elderly – have now been given vaccines and boosters and will have gained considerable protection against Omicron. It remains to be seen how these different factors affect figures. At present, data is still being gathered and it is too early to be sure. At the same time, policy decisions to protect public health still have to be taken.

The problem is highlighted by infectious disease epidemiologist Professor Mark Woolhouse of Edinburgh University. “There is inevitably a lag between infection and hospitalisation,” he told the journal *Nature* last week. “But in the meantime, policy decisions have to be made, and that is not straightforward.”

### **Is the virus likely to lose its power to cause severe illness?**

Many scientists believe evidence is now suggesting that this idea may be correct. Recent studies in Scotland, England and South Africa all point in this direction. “My gut feeling is that this variant is the first step in a process by which the virus adapts to the human population to produce more benign symptoms,” says Dr Julian Tang, professor of Respiratory Sciences at Leicester University. “In a sense, it is to the virus’s advantage if it affects people in a way that they don’t get too sick – because then they can walk around and mingle in society and spread the virus even more.”

### **So will Covid-19 end up behaving like flu?**

Some health officials have predicted that Covid-19 could end up behaving like influenza, which requires a new vaccine to deal with new strains that appear every year. However, Professor Martin Hibberd, of the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine, argues that coronaviruses – like those that already cause common colds – do not behave this way: “They do not appear as new strains every year. The reason we get colds in winter is because our immunity to coronaviruses does not last very long. And this virus seems to be more similar to those that cause common colds. In other words, we may still need to think about giving vaccines to protect against Covid-19 every year because immunity will always slip.”

That does not mean we face “doom and gloom” for the next five years, adds Tang. “I think the virus will evolve itself out of the pandemic strain very soon and become milder, more transmissible to the point where you may only need to think about vaccinating the more vulnerable members of the population.”

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HEADLINE	12/26 Freezing temps, snow, wind western WA
SOURCE	<a href="https://mynorthwest.com/3292750/snow-arrives-western-washington-day-after-christmas/">https://mynorthwest.com/3292750/snow-arrives-western-washington-day-after-christmas/</a>
GIST	<p>Freezing temperatures have settled in over Western Washington after a day of several inches of snow for most locations, creating an ice rink for commuters on Monday morning.</p> <p>Winter Storm Warnings for the greater Seattle area and Winter Storm Advisories for the whole of Western Washington expired at 3 p.m. However, a Wind Chill Advisory and Wind Advisory are in effect for Bellingham and western Skagit County until Monday morning.</p> <p><b>Temperatures into the teens</b></p> <p>Temperatures will dip not just in Whatcom and Skagit Counties, but across the whole region, according to forecasters. Expect low to mid-30s for the highs and teens to low 20s for the lows.</p> <p>“No snow melting here for the next two to three days, probably,” Seattle meteorologist Michael Snyder, who runs <a href="#">SeattleWXGuy</a> on Twitter, told KIRO Radio.</p> <p>Snyder said it’s pretty unusual for the Puget Sound region to see temperatures in the teens.</p>

“The last time we were in the mid-teens was in 2010. And in 2008, we did it once there, too,” he said “It’s getting more and more rare for the Puget Sound.”

There’s a chance of snow again at least through Wednesday. Temperatures warm up again on Thursday with rain in the forecast, only to dip back into the 20s and 30s into Friday.

Snyder said that arctic air masses like to arrive in pairs, a lot of times.

The National Weather Service reports the following snow totals for Dec. 26th:

Seattle – 6 ” as of 8:20 a.m.

Arlington – 7.5” as of 8:15 a.m.

Bellingham – 7” as of 7:00 a.m.

Bremerton – 5” as of 8:30 a.m.

Anacortes – 5” as of 7:30 a.m.

Bainbridge Island – 4” as of 9:50 a.m.

Everett – 4” as of 8:45 a.m.

Federal Way – 3” as of 7:15 a.m.

Olympia – 1.8” as of 9:00 a.m.

Poulsbo – 1.6” as of 6:00 a.m.

Tacoma – 0.5” as of 7:00 a.m.

Port Angeles – 16” as of 7:00 a.m.

Mount Vernon – 12” as of 8:40 a.m.

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HEADLINE	<b>12/26 SDOT director departure signals changes?</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.seattletimes.com/seattle-news/transportation/seattle-transportation-leaders-exit-may-signal-changes-under-harrell-administration/">https://www.seattletimes.com/seattle-news/transportation/seattle-transportation-leaders-exit-may-signal-changes-under-harrell-administration/</a>
GIST	<p>In Sam Zimbabwe’s second week as director of the Seattle Department of Transportation, Seattle was hit with more snow than the city had seen in 52 years.</p> <p>It was an appropriate start to the job for Zimbabwe, who would spend much of his three-year tenure jumping from one emergency to the next — the teardown of the viaduct, the restart of a nearly billion-dollar tax levy, the COVID-19 pandemic, the closing of the West Seattle Bridge, the takeover of six city blocks by protesters and an initiative from Tim Eyman that briefly restricted Seattle’s options for transit funding.</p> <p>And yet, “beyond those emergencies, we were also able to do a lot of systemic things and get a lot done over the course of a really tumultuous three years,” Zimbabwe said in an interview last week.</p> <p>Zimbabwe will leave the city at the end of the year in much the same way he began his job: with snow in the forecast and an urgent list of things still to be done. He will exit at the behest of Mayor-elect Bruce Harrell, who announced last week he would replace him. Zimbabwe’s chief of staff, Kristen Simpson, will take over as interim director while Harrell searches for a replacement.</p> <p>“As the new administration transitions into office, this is both the right time and the most effective time to make a leadership change at SDOT,” said a spokesperson for Harrell, Jamie Housen. Starting the search now, rather than midadministration, would make the transition smoother, he said.</p> <p>Harrell was not made available for an interview.</p> <p>What comes next for the department under Harrell remains to be seen. Harrell’s focus will be on the department’s culture, Housen said, organized around the “key principles of inclusivity, transparency and accessibility.” The mayor-elect will also work on improving transit access, safety, climate, increasing outreach and moving goods and cargo, Housen said.</p>

Harrell and his new transportation director will inherit a lengthy list of priorities. The fate of the long-delayed First Avenue streetcar remains unclear. Repairs to the West Seattle Bridge must be completed. Pedestrian deaths are on the rise. Seattle's bridges and sidewalks are in need of repairs. And the city's \$930 million "Move Seattle" levy will expire in 2024, leaving it to Harrell to decide how to sell voters on a replacement.

It's a big job. "If SDOT wants City Hall to ask voters in 2024 to renew the Move Seattle property tax with a straight face, they need to make more progress on projects [promised to voters in 2015](#)," said Councilmember Alex Pedersen, chair of the transportation committee.

"My hope," said Alex Hudson, executive director of the Transportation Choices Coalition, "is that there's a focus on stability and delivery."

#### **"competent bureaucrat"**

Zimbabwe came to Seattle by way of Washington, D.C., where he was the District's Department of Transportation's chief project-delivery officer. With a background in transit-oriented development, he had the trappings of an urbanist type who'd push for an array of transportation options rather than just single-occupancy vehicles.

While that was true, said Hudson, who was a member of the search committee that found Zimbabwe, it was his work on large projects that made him a finalist. "That was all the icing, because what we really liked about Sam was that he could deliver on capital projects," Hudson said.

Between crises, that's where much of Zimbabwe's focus landed, specifically around completing projects promised as part of the 2015 Move Seattle levy. After winning voter approval under the administration of Ed Murray, Mayor Jenny Durkan concluded the ballot measure had overpromised on what it would achieve. Righting the ship became Zimbabwe's job. Most notable was the completion of planned bike lanes downtown, as well as the addition of crosswalk signals that gave pedestrians a head start.

It was this mission, more than any ideological vision, that drove Zimbabwe's work, he said. "I think they thought that [Seattle's] gonna look like Copenhagen or something" under his watch, he said. "I more felt like my whole job was to do the work well, and to get the department working around commitments we'd already made, projects we'd already started, values we already held and get those done."

"We tend to judge people a lot by what they do," said Hudson, "and sometimes forget to also measure what doesn't happen. And I think that Sam's time here is one in which a whole lot of balls didn't fall that could have under less competent leadership."

With so much outstanding, Zimbabwe's dismissal came as a surprise to some. After years of churn in the department, he seemed to bring some stability. Meanwhile, 11 other city departments or offices are currently led by acting directors who were never confirmed by the City Council.

"He's not really a flashy ideologue," said Gordon Padelford, executive director of Seattle Neighborhood Greenways. "He's just a competent bureaucrat, in the best sense of the word."

But, said Housen, Harrell's decision is informed, in part, by "the input of hundreds, if not thousands, of voters who he personally spoke to about neighborhood transportation issues and priorities at grocery stores and at campaign events over the past year."

#### **Increased outreach**

Since its founding in the late 1990s, leadership in the transportation department has turned over with each new mayor — of which there have been many in Seattle over the past 25 years.

Former Mayor Mike McGinn said that's partially because residents' perception of a mayor's performance is shaped by their experience with transportation in the city.

“It’s a high-profile position in which the public interacts with it every day,” he said. “It’s unlike parks or libraries, in which your interaction is usually a positive one. Your interaction with the transportation system is likely to be a negative one.”

Housen, the spokesperson for Harrell, said the mayor-elect wanted to announce changes to SDOT early, as it’s a critical department. Under new leadership, the department will focus more on outreach than it did before, he said.

“Communities will feel more informed and involved in the SDOT process when decisions are being made,” Housen said. “Transit expansion and car pollution reduction will be focused on communities most often left out and most impacted, including in South Seattle. There will be clear expectations around and opportunities for local input, and even if neighbors disagree with the ultimate conclusion of a project or policy, they will know their voice was heard before decisions were made and finalized.”

Asked for a specific example of SDOT falling short on outreach, Housen did not respond.

In a transportation ecosystem like Seattle’s, SDOT’s director must balance a broad range of interests, which can be a challenge. Hudson said the next director should focus on broadening transit access beyond Seattle’s borders, look for incentives to get people out of single-occupancy vehicles, find new ways to bring in revenue for transit and finally tackle the streetcar question. Padelford said the director should have plans for pedestrian safety and making Seattle a more walkable, accessible place.

Meanwhile, Warren Aakervik, retired president of Ballard Oil, said SDOT has had a dearth of expertise around freight mobility. He called Zimbabwe “nice” but said the department’s underappreciation of freight had continued under his watch. “I think the person ought to have some training in free mobility of what it takes to move the freight trucks,” he said.

President of the West Seattle Chamber of Commerce, Whitney Moore, said she appreciated Zimbabwe’s leadership around the West Seattle Bridge. But she disagreed with the decision to add a bike lane to West Marginal Way, which she said took away “valuable capacity on a major detour and freight route that provides connectivity for our community.”

“With new leadership at City Hall, we believe there is an opportunity to take a fresh look at that project as well as set a better course for maintenance of its bridges, so we never find ourselves in this current situation again,” she said.

For Zimbabwe’s part, he sees the next director’s biggest challenges as relating to the city’s infrastructure. “There’s a lot of other infrastructure challenges that are out there, some of which we know about and some of which we don’t,” he said.

As for his next step, Zimbabwe isn’t saying just yet. But he does know this: He’s staying in Seattle.

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HEADLINE	12/26 New York continues to set records
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.fox5ny.com/news/new-record-nearly-50000-new-covid-cases-in-ny">https://www.fox5ny.com/news/new-record-nearly-50000-new-covid-cases-in-ny</a>
GIST	<p><b>NEW YORK</b> - The number of positive <a href="#">COVID-19</a> cases in <a href="#">New York</a> continues to set records, as the state confirmed that 49,708 positive cases were reported on December 24 alone.</p> <p>That number marks the highest single-day total in the state since the pandemic began.</p> <p>Just 36,454 people tested positive for COVID on Christmas Day, however, far fewer people were out receiving tests.</p>

<a href="#">Return to Top</a>	<p>Almost every day in the past week has set a new record for positive cases since the pandemic began in 2020.</p> <p>A week prior there were fewer than 13,000 cases a day reported statewide.</p> <p>NY has passed 3,000,000 coronavirus cases since the start of the pandemic according to statistics released on Wednesday afternoon.</p> <p>The nationwide spike in cases has been wreaking havoc on everything from sports to shipping and especially travel, with 1,141 flights canceled over the holiday weekend and another 4,578 flights delayed, largely due to rising coronavirus infections among flight crews.</p> <p>Earlier this week, Delta's CEO sent a letter to CDC Director Dr. Rochelle Walensky, asking the agency to revisit quarantine guidelines for those who are fully vaccinated.</p> <p>Globally, airlines scrapped about 2,200 flights as of Sunday morning, down from more than 2,800 from the day before, FlightAware's data showed. The site does not say why flights are canceled.</p>
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<b>HEADLINE</b>	<b>12/26 Pandemic pushes 97M into poverty</b>
<b>SOURCE</b>	<a href="https://www.cnn.com/2021/12/26/business/global-poverty-covid-pandemic-intl-hnk/index.html">https://www.cnn.com/2021/12/26/business/global-poverty-covid-pandemic-intl-hnk/index.html</a>
<b>GIST</b>	<p><b>Hong Kong (CNN Business)</b>Dipali Roy couldn't afford to eat.</p> <p>She and her husband, Pradip Roy, were garment workers in Bangladesh when the <a href="#">Covid-19 pandemic</a> hit last spring, leading to mass layoffs at their factory.</p> <p>Like <a href="#">millions of people</a> around the world, both lost their jobs in the capital city of Dhaka, where they had worked for years making pants, shirts and jackets. And like countless <a href="#">other migrants</a>, they were forced to move home to the countryside to cut down on expenses.</p> <p>The World Bank estimates that 97 million people across the globe fell into poverty due to the pandemic in 2020, living on less than \$2 a day.</p> <p>There has been little improvement since. "Globally, the increase in poverty that occurred in 2020 due to Covid still lingers, and the Covid-induced poor in 2021 continues to be 97 million people," economists at the World Bank said in a <a href="#">blog</a> post earlier this year. They noted, however, that overall poverty should go down this year.</p> <p>"We barely had enough to return home," Dipali Roy said in an interview in Bengali from the family's home, a corrugated metal shack in a village in northern Bangladesh.</p> <p>As the couple looked for new ways to earn a living, they struggled to adjust. They tried to find a loan to start a small business, but at first no one was able or willing to help. Some local nonprofit organizations asked for collateral, which they didn't have.</p> <p>Hoping to land a job in agriculture, Pradip Roy approached some farmers. But he was dismissed as a "Dhaka man," who wouldn't be able to cope in harsh weather conditions, recounted his wife.</p> <p>Above all, "food was the biggest problem," said 20-year-old Dipali Roy, who was pregnant at the time and sometimes could only have one meal a day through a public rationing program. "I didn't know what to do ... We would just have to sit and wait when they would bring food."</p> <p>2020 led to a historic setback in the fight against global poverty, with the number of the world's poorest rising <a href="#">for the first time in over 20 years</a>, according to the World Bank.</p>

Carolina Sánchez-Páramo, global director of poverty and equity at the World Bank, likened the pandemic to a natural disaster that would quickly spread beyond its epicenter in East Asia.

"We knew the tsunami was coming," she told CNN Business.

"The question was not if this [economic shock] was going to reach the other developing regions, but when."

### **Rising inequality**

Even as tens of millions of people were being pushed into destitution, the ultra-rich became wealthier. Last year, billionaires enjoyed the [highest boost](#) to their share of wealth on record, according to the World Inequality Lab.

And while it took just nine months for the world's 1,000 richest people to reclaim their fortunes during the pandemic, it could be [more than a decade](#) before the least fortunate recover, according to Oxfam International's annual inequality report, released in January.

Shameran Abed, executive director of BRAC International, a nonprofit that works to alleviate poverty across Asia and Africa, pointed to the widening wealth gap, saying that "the world's three richest people" could likely wipe out ultra poverty on Earth.

"It's not their responsibility alone," he added. "But I'm just saying that generally there's enough resources [to tackle the problem]."

Recently, the top 1% has been under pressure to pitch in on humanitarian issues.

In November, the director of the United Nations' World Food Programme [called on](#) billionaires including the world's two richest men, Jeff Bezos and Elon Musk, to "step up now, on a one-time basis."

In an interview with CNN's Becky Anderson, David Beasley said that giving \$6 billion, or about 2% of Musk's net worth, could help solve world hunger.

"[It's] \$6 billion to help 42 million people that are literally going to die if we don't reach them. It's not complicated," he added.

The call-out got a direct response from Musk, who later said on Twitter that if the organization could lay out "exactly how" the funding would solve the issue, he would "sell Tesla stock right now and do it."

The Tesla CEO did not publicly respond when the UN released [a plan](#) in November.

### **What's needed now**

Abed, who recently worked with members of parliament in the United Kingdom to declare [an "emergency"](#) on the issue, argues that "poverty is a policy choice."

"We have the know-how to pull large amounts of people out of poverty," said the nonprofit leader, whose team helped the Roys with a loan that the couple said got them back on their feet.

"There's plenty of evidence of what works, what doesn't work."

Experts say the first task is to concentrate on vaccinations.

"We need to make sure that everybody has access to vaccines or some sort of treatment for the pandemic, because till you manage to control the health shock, it's very hard to think about economic recovery right?" said Sánchez-Páramo. "That's almost like a necessary condition for anything else to happen."



[Vaccine inequality](#) has become a major issue as many of the world's richest countries [hoard](#) shots, buying up enough doses to vaccinate their populations several times over and failing to deliver on their promises to share them with the developing world.

And as governments continue to rebuild, they should also focus on reactivating economic activity that would generate employment, such as in the service sector, according to Sánchez-Páramo.

Over the past two years, governments around the world have rolled out stimulus packages [to help prop up](#) their respective economies.

Sánchez-Páramo noted that while many have since come under "fiscal pressure" over how much they spent, it was important not to roll back safety net programs too quickly.

"They [should] wait for employment to recover before they withdraw income support from some of these more vulnerable households," she said.

"Because if we consolidate and roll back the support too quickly, we may actually see a second wave of increases in poverty because the employment is not yet there."

### **Glimmers of hope**

Back in Bangladesh, the Roys are having better days.

After securing a loan of 40,000 taka (\$466), the couple purchased a van and a goat to support themselves, they said.

Pradip Roy now works as driver with his van, ferrying passengers for the equivalent of about \$6 a day. He said the family has no plans to return to the city, and is now saving up to buy a cow and some agricultural land.

While the two have technically climbed out of poverty, the hardships of the coronavirus crisis have made their mark.

Dipali Roy, who described the pangs of hunger while she was pregnant as "the most painful" time of her life, said "if I think back to, or remember those times, my heart bursts with tears."

"But now we are having very good days," she added, saying that she had regained hope for the future, and dreams that their six-month-old son will go on to get a master's degree.

Still, they have a reminder for the international community: do not forget those still left behind.

"There are a lot of people like us who fell to the bottom," said Pradip Roy. "So if you stand beside them they can also rise back up like us, slowly."

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HEADLINE	12/25 Pentagon cuts CONUS COLA 48,000 troops
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.foxnews.com/us/pentagon-to-cut-stateside-cost-of-living-stipend-for-thousands-of-troops-in-2022">https://www.foxnews.com/us/pentagon-to-cut-stateside-cost-of-living-stipend-for-thousands-of-troops-in-2022</a>
GIST	<p>The Department of Defense (DoD) <a href="#">announced</a> last week that troops in 15 metropolitan areas and 21 non-metropolitan counties in the continental United States will be cut off from a cost-of-living allowance starting Jan. 1.</p> <p>The change will lead to approximately 48,000 troops missing out on the Continental United States Cost-of-Living Allowance (CONUS COLA), according to <a href="#">Stars and Stripes</a>.</p>

	<p>Approximately 6,000 service members will remain recipients of the \$8.5 million that the Pentagon allocated for the stipend, which is given to troops who are stationed at excessively expensive locations in the lower 48.</p> <p>The 2022 list comprises 20 non-metropolitan counties and six metropolitan areas, which include New York City, Long Island, and Staten Island in New York; Nantucket, Mass.; Boulder, Colo.; and San Francisco, Calif.</p> <p>The COLA rate is based on information gathered by a contractor, which analyzes cost of transportation, goods and services, federal income taxes, sales taxes, and miscellaneous expenses, according to the DoD.</p> <p>A location becomes eligible for COLA when non-housing costs exceed 8% above the national average. Among the locations that were cut in 2022 is the Washington, D.C., area, where troops had received a 1% supplement in 2021. Stipends for troops in Boston and Worcester, Mass., also got the ax.</p> <p>Troops located in New York City will receive the highest stipend at 6%, which is down from 7% in 2021.</p> <p>How much COLA a service member earns depends on geographic duty location, pay grade, years of service, and dependency status. The Pentagon explained that monthly payments for each CONUS COLA percentage point vary from \$33 to \$59 per month for troops with dependents, and from \$22 to \$45 per month for those without dependents.</p>
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<b>HEADLINE</b>	<b>12/26 New Covid pills come with a catch</b>
<b>SOURCE</b>	<a href="https://abcnews.go.com/Health/wireStory/explainer-easy-covid-19-pills-catch-81944236">https://abcnews.go.com/Health/wireStory/explainer-easy-covid-19-pills-catch-81944236</a>
<b>GIST</b>	<p>Newly infected COVID-19 patients have two new treatment options that can be taken at home.</p> <p>But that convenience comes with a catch: The pills have to be taken as soon as possible once symptoms appear.</p> <p>The challenge is getting tested, getting a prescription and starting the pills in a short window.</p> <p>U.S. regulators authorized Pfizer's pill, Paxlovid, and Merck's molnupiravir last week. In high-risk patients, both were shown to reduce the chances of hospitalization or death from COVID-19, although Pfizer's was much more effective.</p> <p>A closer look:</p> <p><b>WHO SHOULD TAKE THESE PILLS?</b></p> <p>The antiviral pills aren't for everyone who gets a positive test. The pills are intended for those with mild or moderate COVID-19 who are more likely to become seriously ill. That includes older people and those with other health conditions like heart disease, cancer or diabetes that make them more vulnerable. Both pills were OK'd for adults while Paxlovid is authorized for children ages 12 and older.</p> <p><b>WHO SHOULDN'T TAKE THESE PILLS?</b></p> <p>Merck's molnupiravir is not authorized for children because it might interfere with bone growth. It also isn't recommended for pregnant women because of the potential for birth defects. Pfizer's pill isn't recommended for patients with severe kidney or liver problems. It also may not be the best option for some because it may interact with other prescriptions a patient is taking. The antiviral pills aren't authorized for people hospitalized with COVID-19.</p> <p><b>WHAT'S THE TREATMENT WINDOW?</b></p>

The pills have to be started as soon as possible, within five days of the start of symptoms. Cough, headache, fever, the loss of taste or smell and muscle and body aches are among the more common signs. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention offers a website to check your symptoms.

Dr. Cameron Wolfe, an infectious disease specialist at Duke University Hospital, advises getting a test as soon as you have symptoms of COVID-19.

“If you wait until you have started to get breathless, you have already to a large extent missed the window where these drugs will be helpful,” Wolfe said.

#### WHERE CAN I GET THE PILLS?

You'll need a prescription first from a doctor or other authorized health worker. The U.S. government is buying the pills from Merck and Pfizer and providing them for free, but supplies will be limited initially. They'll be shipped to states where they will be available at drugstores, community health centers and other places. Treatment lasts five days.

Some pharmacists may be able to administer a quick COVID-19 test and prescribe the pills all in one visit. They already do this in many states for flu or strep throat.

#### WILL THE PILLS WORK FOR THE OMICRON VARIANT?

The pills are expected to be effective against omicron because they don't target the spike protein where most of the variant's worrisome mutations reside. The two pills work in different ways to prevent the virus from reproducing.

#### ARE THERE OTHER OPTIONS FOR NEW COVID-19 PATIENTS?

Yes, but they aren't as easy to use as a pill: They are given by IV or injection, typically at a hospital or clinic. Three drugs provide virus-fighting antibodies, although laboratory testing suggests the two aren't effective against omicron. British drugmaker GlaxoSmithKline's antibody drug appears to work, and officials say they are working to increase the U.S. supply. The only antiviral drug approved in the U.S., remdesivir, is for people hospitalized with COVID-19.

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HEADLINE	<b>12/26 Russia options if West refuses guarantees?</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://abcnews.go.com/International/wireStory/putin-mull-options-west-refuses-guarantees-81943654">https://abcnews.go.com/International/wireStory/putin-mull-options-west-refuses-guarantees-81943654</a>
GIST	<p>MOSCOW -- Russian President Vladimir Putin said Sunday he would ponder a slew of options if the West fails to meet his push for security guarantees precluding NATO's expansion to Ukraine.</p> <p>Earlier this month, Moscow submitted draft security documents demanding that NATO deny membership to Ukraine and other former Soviet countries and roll back its military deployments in Central and Eastern Europe.</p> <p>The Kremlin presented its security demand amid tensions over a Russian troop buildup near Ukraine in recent weeks that has fueled Western fears of a possible invasion. U.S. President Joe Biden warned Putin in a video call earlier this month that Russia will face “severe consequences” if it attacks Ukraine.</p> <p>Russia has denied an intention of launching an invasion and, in its turn, accused Ukraine of hatching plans to try to reclaim control of the territories held by Moscow-backed rebels by force. Ukraine has rejected the claim.</p> <p>Putin has urged the West to move quickly to meet his demands, warning that Moscow will have to take “adequate military-technical measures” if the West continues its “aggressive” course “on the threshold of our home.”</p>

Asked to specify what such Moscow's response could be, he said in comments aired by Russian state TV Sunday that "it could be diverse," adding that "it will depend on what proposals our military experts submit to me."

The U.S. and its allies have refused to offer Russia the kind of guarantee on Ukraine that Putin wants, citing NATO's principle that membership is open to any qualifying country. They agreed, however, to launch security talks with Russia next month to discuss its concerns.

Putin said the talks with the U.S. will be held in Geneva. In parallel, negotiations are also set to be held between Russia and NATO and broader discussions are expected under the aegis of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe.

In remarks broadcast Sunday, Putin said Russia submitted the demands in the hope of a constructive answer from the West.

"We didn't do it just to see it blocked ... but for the purpose of reaching a negotiated diplomatic result that would be fixed in legally binding documents," Putin said.

He reaffirmed that NATO membership for Ukraine or the deployment of alliance weapons there is a red line for Moscow that it wouldn't allow the West to cross.

"We have nowhere to retreat," he said, adding that NATO could deploy missiles in Ukraine that would take just four or five minutes to reach Moscow. "They have pushed us to a line that we can't cross. They have taken it to the point where we simply must tell them; 'Stop!'"

He voiced concern that the U.S. and its allies could try to drag out the security talks and use them as a cover to pursue a military buildup near Russia.

He noted that Russia published its security demands to make them known to the public and raise the pressure on the U.S. and its allies to negotiate a security deal.

Putin's spokesman Dmitry Peskov said in remarks broadcast Sunday that NATO's expansion to Ukraine or other ex-Soviet nations is "a matter of life or death for us."

He noted that Friday's test-firing of Russia's Zircon hypersonic missiles would help make Russia's push for security guarantees "more convincing."

Friday's launches were the latest in a series of test of Zircon, which Putin said is capable of flying at nine times the speed of sound to a range of more than 1,000 kilometers (620 miles). They marked the first time Zircon missiles were launched in a salvo, indicating the completion of tests before the new missile enters service with the Russian navy next year and arms its cruisers, frigates and submarines.

Peskov on Sunday also pointed at Putin's earlier warning that a Ukrainian offensive against the rebel-held territories would entail "grave consequences" for Ukraine's statehood, adding that "they know it well in Kyiv and they know it well in Washington."

Russia annexed Ukraine's Crimean Peninsula in 2014 and shortly after threw its support behind a separatist rebellion in the country's east. Over more than seven years, the fighting has killed over 14,000 people and devastated Ukraine's industrial heartland, known as the Donbas.

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HEADLINE	12/25 Russia troops withdrawing Ukraine border?
SOURCE	<a href="https://news.yahoo.com/thousands-russian-troops-withdrawing-ukraine-131138933.html">https://news.yahoo.com/thousands-russian-troops-withdrawing-ukraine-131138933.html</a>

GIST	<p>Thousands of Russian troops are reportedly withdrawing from the Ukrainian border after conducting drills for roughly a month.</p> <p><a href="#">Reuters</a> reported on Saturday that more than 10,000 Russian troops were leaving a number of regions near Ukraine - including Crimea, Rostov and Kuban - and returning to permanent bases.</p> <p>The news service pointed to reporting from the Interfax news agency, which cited the Russian military.</p> <p>"A stage of combat coordination of divisions, combat crews, squads at motorized units... has been completed. More than 10,000 military servicemen... will march to their permanent deployment from the territory of the combined arms' area of drills," the Russian army is quoted as saying in the Interfax report, according to Reuters.</p> <p>Russia had amassed tens of thousands of troops in regions north, east and south of Ukraine, Reuters noted, which alarmed Kyiv and Western nations that Moscow may be planning an attack.</p> <p>U.S. intelligence earlier this year revealed that Russia was <a href="#">planning a military offensive against Ukraine</a> as early as next year that would involve the deployment of 175,000 troops near the border.</p> <p>The intelligence document, which was obtained by <a href="#">The Washington Post</a>, included satellite photos of the military buildup.</p> <p>Russia, however, has denied having any plans of that kind. Instead, Moscow has called on NATO to promise that it will not extend the alliance in the direction of Russia's borders, according to Reuters.</p> <p>Russia has reportedly said that Ukraine's increased association with NATO is presenting a threat to Moscow.</p> <p>The Kremlin has also said it has the authority to deploy troops within its borders as it sees necessary, according to Reuters.</p> <p>Reports of Russian troops withdrawing from the Ukrainian border come more than two weeks after President Biden and Russian President Vladimir Putin <a href="#">spoke by phone for more than two hours</a>.</p> <p>The White House said Biden during the conversation warned Putin against invading Ukraine, cautioning that Moscow would suffer economic consequences if it mobilized an offensive against Ukraine.</p> <p>Biden also reportedly presented the option of de-escalating the situation through diplomatic channels with the U.S. and other European nations.</p>
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HEADLINE	<b>12/23 Will this pandemic ever end?</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://news.yahoo.com/pandemic-ever-end-heres-happened-130053504.html">https://news.yahoo.com/pandemic-ever-end-heres-happened-130053504.html</a>
GIST	<p>This started as a story about what happens after a pandemic ends.</p> <p>I pitched my editor on the idea in early May. Every adult in America could get a vaccine. COVID numbers started to fall. If the Roaring '20s came after the Spanish flu a century ago, did that mean we were on track for another Roaring '20s now? Would "<a href="#">Hot Vax Summer</a>" give way to Decadent Gatsby Party Autumn?</p> <p>I started to dig in. A number of compelling parallels emerged: America 100 years ago had staggering income inequality. A booming stock market. Racial uprisings. Anti-immigrant sentiment. A one-term president plagued by scandals after he left office. Plenty of material for a story.</p> <p>Then the pandemic didn't end.</p>

Vaccinations stalled. The Delta variant fueled new waves of [infections, hospitalizations and deaths](#). By September, some states had more hospitalized COVID patients than they did during the winter surge. The economic outlook for this decade has gone [from "champagne-soaked" to "room temperature."](#) In late November, the World Health Organization announced a new "[variant of concern](#)": [Omicron](#), which is currently [on the cusp of pummeling California](#).

I called a meeting with my editor. I said I didn't think it was a good time to write a story in which the premise was "this pandemic is over, now what?"

The pandemic wasn't ending. Would it ever?

This is not humanity's first time staring down a seemingly unstoppable disease. Pandemics (a disease affecting a large number of people in multiple countries or regions around the world, per [the World Health Organization](#)), epidemics (a disease affecting people in a country or region) and outbreaks (a sudden occurrence of an infectious disease) have plagued us throughout history. Just in the past century, we've survived a few.

How did those end? And how might we get ourselves out of this one?

### **Spanish flu**

**How it started:** Unclear, but probably not in Spain. It was a particularly deadly strain of H1N1 influenza and first took root in the U.S. in Kansas.

The disease was so virulent and killed so many young people that if you heard, "This is just ordinary influenza by another name," you knew that was a lie," said John Barry, the author of "The Great Influenza."

There was "zero partisanship" over the virus, Barry said.

If the flu did hit your town, it hit hard: A young person could wake up in the morning feeling well and be dead 24 hours later. Half the people who died of the flu in 1918 were in their 20s and 30s.

"It was a spooky time," said Georges Benjamin, executive director of the American Public Health Assn. So how did we, as a species, beat the Spanish flu? We didn't. We survived it. It torched through individual communities until it ran out of people to infect. A third of the world's population was believed to have contracted the Spanish flu during that pandemic, and it had a [case-fatality rate of as high as 10-20% globally and 2.5%](#) in the United States. (Johns Hopkins University reports the COVID-19 case fatality rate in the U.S. is 1.6% as of Dec. 2021.) Roughly 675,000 people in America died out of a population of 103.2 million, a number [recently surpassed](#) by COVID-19 victims of a 2020 U.S. population of 329.5 million. Flu vaccines wouldn't be developed until the 1930s and wouldn't become widely available for another decade.

Ultimately, the virus went through a process called attenuation. Basically, it got less bad. We still have descendent strains of the Spanish flu floating around today. It's endemic, not a pandemic.

As a society, we accept a certain amount of death from known diseases. The normal seasonal flu usually kills less than 0.1% of people who contract it. Deaths have been [between 12,000 and 52,000 people](#) in the U.S. annually for the past decade.

The regular seasonal flu is both less contagious and less deadly than COVID-19. That people were washing hands, working from home and socially distancing in the winter 2020 flu season likely contributed to the fact that it was a [comparably light flu season](#). Though business and school closures weren't enough to stave off the devastating winter surge of COVID, the measures were sufficient to keep the flu at bay. One strain may have been [completely extinguished](#).



As places reopen and people feel more confident about socializing and traveling again, the flu could make a calamitous comeback. (By the way, [have you gotten your flu shot yet?](#))

**How it ended:** Endemic

## Polio

**How it started:** The first documented polio epidemic in the United States was in 1894. Outbreaks occurred throughout the first half of the 20th century, primarily killing children and leaving many more paralyzed.

Polio reached pandemic levels by the 1940s. There were more than 600,000 cases of polio in the United States in the 20th century, and nearly 60,000 deaths — a case fatality rate of 9.8%. In 1952 alone, there were 57,628 reported cases of polio resulting in 3,145 deaths.

"Polio was every mother's scourge," Benjamin said. "People were afraid to death of polio."

Polio was [highly contagious](#): In a household with an infected adult or child, 90% to 100% of susceptible people would develop evidence in their blood of also having been infected. Polio is not spread through the air — transmission occurs from oral-oral infection (say, sharing a drinking glass), or by "what's nicely called hand-fecal," Paula Cannon, a virology professor at the USC Keck School of Medicine, told me. "People poop it out, and people get it on their hands and they make you a sandwich."

Polio, like COVID, could have devastating long-term effects even if you survived the initial infection. President Franklin Roosevelt was among the thousands of people who lived with permanent paralysis from polio. Others spent weeks, years, or [the rest of their lives](#) in iron lungs.

Precautions were taken during the polio pandemic. Schools and public pools closed. Then, in 1955, a miracle: a vaccine.

A two-dose course of the polio vaccine proved to be about 90% effective — [similar to the effectiveness](#) of our current COVID vaccines. Vaccine technology was still relatively new, and the polio vaccine was not without side effects. A small number of people who got that vaccine got polio from it. Another subset of recipients developed [Guillain-Barre syndrome](#), a noncontagious autoimmune disorder that can cause paralysis or nerve damage. A [botched batch](#) killed some of the people who received it.

But there were no masses of polio anti-vaxxers. It was a "whole sense of the greater good, that this was the only way out of this terrible scourge," Cannon said. "You would have had to have been a psychopathic monster to not want to be part of the solution."

Benjamin said the polio vaccine campaign became a moment of national unity: "Jonas Salk and the folks that solved the polio problem were national heroes."

By 1979, polio was eradicated in the United States.

**How it ended:** Vaccination

## Smallpox

**How it started:** The disease had been observed in the Eastern hemisphere dating to as early as 1157 BCE, and European colonizers first brought smallpox to North America's previously unexposed Native population in the early 1500s. A [2019 study](#) suggested smallpox and other viruses introduced by colonizers killed as much as 90% of the indigenous population in some areas. Globally, smallpox is [estimated to have killed more than 300 million people](#) just in the 20th century. The case fatality rate of variola major, which caused the majority of smallpox infections, is around 30%.

Outbreaks continued in North America through the centuries after it arrived here, at one point infecting [half the population of the city of Boston](#). We fought back by trying to infect people with a weakened version of it, long before vaccines existed. An enslaved man named [Onesimus is believed to have introduced the concept of smallpox inoculation](#) to North America in 1721 when he told slave owner

Cotton Mather that he had undergone it in West Africa. Mather tried to convince Boston doctors to consider inoculating residents during that outbreak, [to limited success](#). One doctor who inoculated 287 patients reported only 2% of them died of smallpox, compared to a 14.8% death rate among the general population.

In 1777, George Washington ordered troops who had not already had the disease to undergo a version of inoculation in which pus from a smallpox sore was introduced into an open cut. Most people who were inoculated developed a mild case of smallpox, then developed natural immunity. Some died, though at a far lower rate compared with other ways of contracting the disease. The practice of inoculation was [controversial enough](#) — some skeptics said it was not sufficiently tested, some argued it was doctors "playing God," others theorized that it was a conspiracy from slaves to trick white slave owners into killing themselves — that it was banned in several colonies.

Edward Jenner first demonstrated the effectiveness of his newly created smallpox vaccine in England in 1796. Vaccination spread throughout the world, and deaths from smallpox became rarer over time: In a century, smallpox went from being responsible for [1 in 13 deaths in London](#) to about 1 in 100.

But while early vaccines reduced smallpox's power, it still existed: An outbreak hit [New York City in 1947](#). It demonstrated that the vaccines were not 100% effective in everyone forever: 47-year-old Eugene Le Bar, the first fatality, had a smallpox vaccine scar. Israel Weinstein, the city's health commissioner, held a news conference urging all New Yorkers to get vaccinated against smallpox, whether for the first time or what we would now call a "booster shot."

The mayor and President Truman got vaccinated on camera. In less than one month, 6.35 million New Yorkers were vaccinated, in a city of 7.8 million. The final toll of the New York outbreak: 12 cases of smallpox, resulting in 2 deaths.

Our country's final outbreak affected 8 people in the [Rio Grande Valley](#) in 1949.

In 1959, the World Health Organization announced a plan to eradicate smallpox globally with vaccinations. The disease was declared eradicated in 1980.

Of all the diseases our species has tackled, "the only one we've ever been really successful to totally eradicating is smallpox," Benjamin said. The only remaining smallpox pathogens exist in laboratories.

**How it ended:** Vaccination

## **HIV/AIDS**

**How it started:** In 1981, the CDC announced the first cases of what we would later call AIDS.

Roughly [half of Americans](#) who contracted HIV in the early 1980s died of an HIV/AIDS-related condition [within two years](#). Deaths from HIV peaked in the 1990s, with roughly 50,000 in 1995, and have decreased steadily since then: As of 2019, roughly 1.2 million Americans are HIV-positive; there were 5,044 deaths attributed to HIV that year.

The Reagan administration did not take HIV seriously for years. Unlike COVID, which was quickly identified as a respiratory disease, HIV spread for years before scientists knew for sure how it was transmitted. Gay activists who encouraged their community to use condoms in the early 1980s were criticized as "sex-negative."

Today, we know how to prevent the spread of HIV, and treatments for it have progressed to the point where early intervention can make the virus completely undetectable.

"If you're HIV positive, the HIV pandemic never went away for you," said Cannon, who's spent much of her career studying the virus. She described it as a "great irony" that we identified the cause of COVID and developed a vaccine within a year, only to have people refuse it: "Anybody with HIV would tell you that the opposite is true for HIV, where despite decades now of research, we have not been able to come up

with vaccines that work against this shapeshifter of a virus that is HIV, and people would be desperately pleased if there were vaccines."

Around 700,000 people in the U.S. have died of HIV-related illnesses in the 40 years since the disease appeared. In less than two years of the COVID-19 pandemic, we've [surpassed 800,000 COVID deaths](#).

**How it ended:** Endemic

## SARS

**How it started:** SARS first appeared in China in 2002 before making its way to the United States and 28 other countries.

Severe acute respiratory syndrome — quickly shortened to SARS in headlines and news coverage — is caused by a coronavirus named SARS-CoV, or SARS-associated coronavirus. COVID-19 is caused by a virus so similar that it's called SARS-CoV-2.

Globally, more than 8,000 people contracted SARS during the outbreak, and 916 died. (By comparison, there were 10 times more cases of COVID-19 than that registered globally by the end of February 2020.) One hundred fifteen cases of SARS were suspected in the United States; only 8 people had laboratory-confirmed cases of the disease, and none of them died.

Like COVID-19, [fatality rates from SARS](#) were very low for young people — less than 1% for people under 25 — up to a more than 50% rate for people over 65. Overall, the [case fatality rate was 11%](#). [Public anxiety](#) was [widespread](#), including in areas unaffected by SARS.

SARS and COVID-19 have a lot in common. But the diseases — and the way the government responded to them — weren't exactly the same, said Benjamin, who worked for the CDC during the SARS epidemic.

"There wasn't asymptomatic spread. Early on we had a functional test. We had a public health system that was in much better shape than it is today. All those things went wrong this time," he said. "And [COVID-19] turned out to be much more infectious, it turned out to have asymptomatic spread. ... [In 2020] you had a public health system which wasn't ready for prime time because it hadn't been invested in."

Conversely, he said, the response to SARS was robust and immediate. The WHO issued a global alert about an unknown and severe form of pneumonia in Asia on March 12, 2003. The CDC activated its Emergency Operations Center by March 14, and issued an alert for travelers entering the U.S. from Hong Kong and parts of China the next day. Pandemic planning and guidance went into effect by the end of that month.

"When [public health organizations] had the actual genetic sequence mapped out and then they made a test for it, they rapidly got that test out to state and local health departments, they began screening, doing surveillance, we contained it very quickly, we communicated effectively to the public, and it worked," he said.

In the case of SARS, the disease stopped spreading before a vaccine or cure could be created. [Scientists knew](#) another coronavirus could emerge that was more contagious. They [laid the groundwork](#) for developing the COVID-19 vaccines we have now.

**How it ended:** Died out after being controlled by public health measures

## Swine flu

**How it started:** Both the Spanish flu and swine flu were caused by the same type of virus: influenza A H1N1.

Ultimately, [according to the CDC](#), there were about 60.8 million cases of swine flu in the U.S. from April 2009 to April 2010, with 274,304 hospitalizations and 12,469 deaths — a case fatality rate of about 0.02%. So there were millions more cases of swine flu than there were of COVID-19 in the same time period, but a fraction of the fatalities. Eighty percent of swine flu deaths were in people younger than 65.

It was first detected in California on April 15, 2009, and the CDC and the Obama administration declared public health emergencies before the end of that month. As with COVID-19, hospital visits spiked. [Hundreds of schools closed down](#) temporarily. In Texas, a children's hospital [set up tents in the parking lot](#) to handle emergency room overflow; several hospitals in North Carolina banned children from visiting. Hospitals near Colorado Springs, Colo., reported a 30% increase in flu visits. Three-hundred-thousand doses of liquid Tamiflu for children were released from the national pandemic stockpile.

In the same month cases were first detected, the CDC started identifying the virus strain for a potential vaccine. The first flu shots with H1N1 protections went into arms in October 2009. WHO declared the swine flu pandemic over in August 2010. But like Spanish flu, swine flu never completely went away.

**How it ended:** Endemic

## **Ebola**

**How it started:** From 2014 to 2016, 28,616 people in West Africa had Ebola, and 11,310 died — a 39.5% case fatality rate. Despite [widespread fears](#) about it spreading here — including [close to 100 tweets](#) from the man who would be president when the COVID-19 pandemic began — only two people contracted Ebola on U.S. soil, and neither died.

So how did we escape Ebola? Unlike COVID, Ebola isn't transmitted in the air, and there's no asymptomatic spread. It spreads through the bodily fluids of people actively experiencing symptoms, either directly or through bedding and other objects they've touched. If you haven't been within three feet of a person with Ebola, you have almost no risk of getting it.

Part of the problem in Africa, Benjamin said, was that families traditionally washed the bodies of the deceased, exposing themselves to infected fluids. And healthcare workers who treated patients without proper protective equipment or awareness of heightened safety procedures were at risk. Once adequate equipment was delivered to affected areas and precautions were taken by healthcare workers and families of the victims, the disease could be controlled. People needed to temporarily change their behavior to respond to the public health crisis, and they did.

While this particular outbreak ended in 2016, it's very possible we will see another Ebola event in the future. An [Ebola vaccine](#) was approved by the FDA in 2019.

**How it ended:** Subsided after being controlled by public health measures

## **How will COVID end?**

Big picture, "pandemics end because the disease is unable to transmit itself through people or other vectors that allow the transmission of the disease," Benjamin said.

The most likely outcome at this point is that COVID-19 is here to stay, he said: "I think most people now think that it will be endemic for a while." On Twitter, [his colleagues](#) in [epidemiology](#) and [public health](#) seem to [agree](#).

COVID has a lot going for it, as far as viruses go: Unlike Ebola and SARS, it can be spread by people who don't realize they have it. Unlike smallpox, it can [jump species](#), infecting animals and then potentially reinfecting us. Unlike polio, one person can unwittingly spread it to a room full of people, and not enough people are willing to get vaccinated at once to stop it in its tracks. It's less contagious than swine flu, and less deadly than Ebola, landing it in a sort of perverse sweet spot where it infects a lot of people but doesn't kill enough of them to run out of victims. For many people, it's mild enough that it convinces others they don't have to take the disease or precautions against it seriously. No one thought that about smallpox or Ebola.

In a conversation I had with Cannon for a different story in May 2020, she told me if someone were designing a virus with the maximum capacity to succeed, it would look a lot like this coronavirus.

"One of the really superpower things about this virus is its stealthiness," she told me then. "So you can feel fine, you can go hang out with friends and not obey the six-foot rule and the next morning you feel like death and you're like, 'oh crap.'" Back then, she contrasted it with the way we shut down SARS: "The reason we could stop it is everybody who had SARS, you were only infectious while you were sick. You woke up one day feeling like death and that was the day you were infectious. Infected people couldn't walk among us. ... With this coronavirus, they walk amongst us."

So what happens next? In some populations, enough people will get vaccinated to achieve [something like herd immunity](#). In others, it will burn through the population until everyone's had it, and either achieves naturally gained immunity (which confers [less long-term protection](#) than vaccination) or dies. People still die from influenza and HIV in the United States; a disease becoming endemic isn't exactly a happy ending.

"We tolerate the tragedy a lot better when it's a disease that we've seen before," Benjamin said. "It is less scary to us."

Based on where we are now, "I don't think COVID-19 will ever go away," Cannon said.

We're still learning about the Omicron variant. [Early reports out of South Africa](#) suggest it may be a more contagious but [milder version](#) of the disease, though it's too early to say for sure. In a perfect world, COVID would go away entirely; with that possibility almost certainly off the table, an attenuated strain that [displaces the Delta variant](#) and turns COVID into an illness that rarely requires hospitalization is perhaps the best we can hope for at this point.

**How it ends:** A combination of [vaccine](#)- and [naturally-gained immunity](#), attenuation, availability of [rapid testing](#), and [improvements in treatment](#) for active cases could turn it into what skeptics wrongly called it to begin with: a bad cold or flu.

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HEADLINE	12/24 New record daily infections Australia
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.dpa-international.com/topic/new-record-daily-infections-australia-marks-second-covid-urn%3Anewsm%3Adpa.com%3A20090101%3A211225-99-500849">https://www.dpa-international.com/topic/new-record-daily-infections-australia-marks-second-covid-urn%3Anewsm%3Adpa.com%3A20090101%3A211225-99-500849</a>
GIST	<p>Sydney (dpa) - Individual Australian states and territories have posted new record daily coronavirus infections as the country celebrates its second Christmas holiday under the pandemic.</p> <p>New South Wales posted a new record of 6,288 coronavirus infections in a day, the state health ministry said Saturday.</p> <p>That number was up against 5,612 infections a day earlier Friday.</p> <p>The state of Victoria missed out on a record on Saturday, but 2,108 people in the state have had their festive plans foiled after contracting the virus. Six deaths were also reported in Victoria.</p> <p>Queensland announced a new daily record of 765 cases, while Tasmania, an island state south of the Australian mainland, saw a record 33 Covid-19 cases.</p> <p>Health authorities have urged residents to celebrate the Christmas holidays outdoors if possible, to minimise the risk from Covid-19.</p> <p>The Australian Department of Health has encouraged people to entertain outside or open windows for better ventilation and avoid sharing utensils during meals. Anyone with any symptoms is urged to skip celebrations.</p> <p>Australia is currently battling its biggest, most widespread coronavirus outbreak as the Omicron variant has appeared in every state and territory.</p>

	<p>Australia's states and territories are reintroducing restrictions and updating how they trace and isolate positive cases as infections soar across the country.</p> <p>Compulsory mask-wearing is required again in most of Australia as regional leaders try to limit the spread of the Omicron variant.</p> <p>Meanwhile, dozens of domestic flights out of Sydney's Kingsford Smith airport were cancelled on Friday as frontline staff who are considered close contacts to people infected with the coronavirus are required to have a coronavirus test and isolate.</p>
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<b>HEADLINE</b>	<b>12/24 UN agency: Pfizer booster wanes in weeks</b>
<b>SOURCE</b>	<a href="https://www.timesofisrael.com/uk-agency-pfizer-boosters-ability-to-prevent-symptomatic-covid-wanes-within-weeks/">https://www.timesofisrael.com/uk-agency-pfizer-boosters-ability-to-prevent-symptomatic-covid-wanes-within-weeks/</a>
<b>GIST</b>	<p>New data from the UK indicates that the effectiveness of Pfizer vaccine booster shots in preventing symptomatic COVID-19 as a result of the Omicron variant drops considerably within 10 weeks of receiving the inoculation.</p> <p>But it also showed that protection afforded by Moderna boosters remained relatively strong for a longer period.</p> <p>The UK Health Security Agency (UKHSA) reviewed 68,489 Omicron cases in the country. It assessed that Pfizer and Moderna vaccines were around 70 percent effective at preventing symptomatic disease 2-4 weeks after getting a third shot (down from some 90% effective against the previously dominant Delta variant)</p> <p>With Pfizer boosters, this dropped to 45% by 10 weeks, but Moderna booster effectiveness stayed at around 70% for at least 9 weeks.</p> <p>In Israel, the vast majority of people were given Pfizer boosters.</p> <p>Reacting to the findings, Jenny Harries, head of the UKHSA, said boosters were still very important and would help prevent severe cases and deaths.</p> <p>“Despite the headlines people need to really understand that a booster dose is absolutely vital,” Harries told the BBC. “We anticipate it will have a very significant positive impact on preventing serious illness and death.”</p> <p>Notably, most symptomatic Omicron cases are mild. Recent data from the UKHSA has indicated the risk of hospitalization from the strain is 50%-70% lower than Delta.</p> <p>The analysis <a href="#">follows two studies</a>, from Imperial College London and Scottish researchers, that found patients with Omicron were between 20-68% less likely to require hospital treatment than those with Delta.</p> <p>Even if the early studies are borne out, the new variant could still overwhelm health systems because of the sheer number of infections.</p> <p>Countries around the world are looking closely at Britain, where Omicron is now dominant and where COVID-19 cases have surged by more than 50% in a week.</p> <p>Britain reported 119,789 lab-confirmed COVID-19 cases on Thursday, the highest yet during the pandemic and the second day the number has topped 100,000.</p>
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<b>HEADLINE</b>	<b>12/25 States curb power of public health officials</b>
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SOURCE	<a href="https://www.msn.com/en-us/news/us/anger-over-masks-mandates-other-covid-rules-spurs-states-to-curb-power-of-public-health-officials/ar-AAS8BLX?ocid=uxbndlbing">https://www.msn.com/en-us/news/us/anger-over-masks-mandates-other-covid-rules-spurs-states-to-curb-power-of-public-health-officials/ar-AAS8BLX?ocid=uxbndlbing</a>
GIST	<p>At the entrance to the Lowe's in a central Ohio strip mall, a bright blue-and-white sign tells customers that, under local ordinances, they must wear a face covering inside. Next door, at Hale's Ales &amp; Kitchen, a sign asks customers to please be patient with a staff shortage — with no mention of masks.</p> <p>The city line between Columbus and suburban Hilliard crosses right through the strip mall, Mill Run Square. In Columbus, where the Lowe's Home Improvement Store lies, the city council early in the coronavirus pandemic created a mask requirement that remains in place. In Hilliard, where Hales is located, the city council has not imposed a mask rule, despite entreaties from the top county health official as coronavirus cases spiked.</p> <p>Under a new law in Ohio — one of at least 19 states this year that have restricted state or local authorities from safeguarding public health amid the coronavirus pandemic — Franklin County's health commissioner Joe Mazzola can no longer intervene. The county health department was stripped of its power to compel people to wear masks even as the omicron variant fuels a fifth coronavirus surge in the United States.</p> <p>"We've not been able to put in place the policy that would protect our community," Mazzola said.</p> <p>The number of states that have passed laws similar to Ohio's is proliferating fast, from eight identified in one study in May to more than double that many as of last month, according to an analysis by Temple University's Center for Public Health Law Research. And around the country, many more measures are being debated or being prepared for legislative sessions to start early in the new year.</p> <p>These laws — the work of Republican legislators — inhibit health officers' ability to require masks, promote vaccinations or take other steps, such as closing or limiting the number of patrons in restaurants, bars and other indoor public settings. Often, the measures shift those decisions from health experts to elected officials at a time when such coronavirus-fighting strategies have become politically radioactive.</p> <p>A new Indiana law gives city councils and county commissions power to overrule local health officials if their efforts to tame the pandemic are more stringent than rules in effect statewide. Tennessee lawmakers have taken away health officials' ability to decide whether public schools should be closed in an emergency, giving that authority to school boards while also allowing the governor to order all schools to teach students in person.</p> <p>And in Arkansas, a statute forbids any state or local official from compelling masks. As the delta variant was racing around in August, the state's Republican governor, Asa Hutchinson, said he regretted the measure and summoned legislators into a special session to rethink it. The law stayed in place.</p> <p>Conservatives frame this wave of legislating as a matter of individual liberties. Ohio state Sen. Terry Johnson (R), one of the main sponsors of that state's new law, said last spring that its purpose is "restoring reasonable checks and balances" and "giving the people of Ohio a voice in matters of public health."</p> <p>Over the decades, critics have sought to persuade lawmakers to soften or remove safety measures, such as tobacco regulations, or requirements to wear seat belts or motorcycle helmets.</p> <p>"But for them to go after the basis of public health authority is pretty new," said Georges C. Benjamin, executive director of the American Public Health Association.</p> <p>Health officials say the new laws, targeted at coronavirus-fighting strategies, often carry unintended consequences stretching far beyond the pandemic to thwart health departments' longtime roles, such as maintaining food safety.</p> <p>The Ohio law, Senate Bill 22, slows health department's ability to shut down a restaurant to protect customers from a foodborne disease outbreak, several health commissioners there said. Officials now can</p>

issue an order only after a person who ate there gets a documented diagnosis of such an illness — not simply after health inspectors discover unsanitary conditions.

Researchers and health officials also predict such laws will get in the way of dealing with future health crises of unforeseen origin. But as the coronavirus pandemic persists, with omicron having arrived as the most transmissible variant so far, the laws' impact already is clear.

In May, Montana, which has several new statutes narrowing health officials' powers, became the first state to prohibit discrimination based on vaccination status. It applies to any vaccine, not just shots to protect against the coronavirus. It means that employers may ask staff members whether they have been immunized against the virus, but they cannot punish or lay off employees who refuse to disclose their vaccination status or to get the shots. It makes an exception for nursing homes — but not for hospitals or clinics.

When the law took effect May 7, most Montana hospitals were watching the pace of the vaccine rollout and debating whether they needed to make shots essential for their workers. But just east of the Rocky Mountains, Benefis Health System, with two hospitals in Great Falls, had sent a companywide email in April announcing that, unless they had a medical or religious reason, all employees had to receive at least one shot by May 1.

Community members staged protests. With the law imminent, Benefis backed off its mandate, according to health-care experts in the state. Benefis declined to comment on its decision.

For all 62 hospitals in the state, the law creates a bind, according to Rich Rasmussen, president of the Montana Hospital Association.

The state's restrictions collide with what the federal government is ordering hospitals to do. The Department of Health and Human Services created a rule that hospitals and other health facilities with patients insured through Medicare or Medicaid must require their employees to have had at least a first coronavirus shot by Dec. 5.

"Hospitals were moving forward with their compliance" with the federal rule, Rasmussen said, because they feared jeopardizing \$2.1 billion that flows into the state in Medicare and Medicaid payments, and most hospitals "felt a federal requirement trumped state law."

A standoff has been averted for now, because two federal courts in November temporarily blocked the HHS requirement as part of lawsuits objecting to the federal rule. Meanwhile, a health system, a few doctors' practices, several patients and the Montana Medical Association have filed their own lawsuit trying to restore the ability of hospitals and other health providers to compel workers to be vaccinated.

Montana's hospitals argue they must be able to provide safe environments for their workers and patients.

"If you are providing care to neonates, you want to ensure everyone ... is vaccinated," Rasmussen said.

Many Montana employers hold a different view.

Nick Checota, a restaurant owner and music promoter who runs KettleHouse Amphitheater, a 4,500-seat outdoor venue on a river bank near Missoula, said his concert policy is to encourage patrons to wear masks and to get vaccinated or tested before attending an event. It is not required. A few bands have canceled because of the lack of vaccine verification, Checota said.

But he said, "If I'd asked my staff [to be vaccinated], half my employees would have quit. ... Individual rights in Montana are very important to people."

The political moves against vaccine requirements are spreading. Tennessee Gov. Bill Lee (R) in November signed a law that forbids employers from requiring workers, job applicants or customers to

prove they have been vaccinated. Six days later, Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis (R) signed four bills that prohibit employers and educational institutions from requiring workers or students to be vaccinated against the coronavirus and removes the state health officer's ability to order vaccinations in a public health emergency.

In Ohio, House Republicans last month passed a bill that would block employers, schools and colleges from requiring workers and students to get vaccinated if they object for "reasons of personal conscience." Some Republicans in the state Senate are reticent, contending that businesses should be allowed to decide on vaccine policies for themselves.

Senate Bill 22, the Buckeye State's law in effect since June, splintered the party, pitting lawmakers against Ohio's GOP governor Mike DeWine. A year ago, DeWine vetoed another bill that would have limited the state's coronavirus-fighting powers by handing lawmakers power to stop a governor's public health order and tightly limiting the state health department's ability to impose quarantines.

The bill contains those features and added restrictions on local health departments. In March, DeWine vetoed that bill, too, saying it "strikes at the heart of local health departments' ability to move quickly to protect the public from the most serious emergencies Ohio could face."

This time, the legislature overrode the governor's veto on S.B. 22 the following day.

Since the law took effect, health commissioners around the state said they often have felt thwarted.

In Franklin County, which includes Hilliard, the local board of health dates to 1919, the time of a global flu pandemic that killed millions. In July 2020, as the coronavirus spread, the board ordered people to wear masks indoors, except at home. It lifted the rule the following May, weeks before the state law took effect and shortly after the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention had said people who were fully vaccinated no longer needed to wear a mask.

By late summer, cases were surging again.

"We wanted to be able to put a masking requirement in place for our jurisdictions," said Mazzola, the Franklin County health commissioner, who works for the board.

Under the new law, only local governments can make that decision. The Franklin health district covers 14 cities, 17 townships and 10 villages. "We called on our city managers, city councils, mayors," Mazzola said. Two of the cities, Bexley and Whitehall, reinstated mask rules. The others did not. The villages and most of the townships do not have authority to create such rules. Four townships do; they did not require masks.

"That's really an unfortunate outcome here," Mazzola said. "It creates mixed messaging."

The new law also means the Franklin County health department no longer can create uniform rules for all school systems within its area.

When the school year opened, after a year of classes mostly online, 5 of the 17 districts required masks for students and teachers in every grade, according to Ayaz Hyder, a researcher in Ohio State University's College of Public Health who has been tracking the pandemic in nearby public schools. The first weeks of the year, the districts with universal masking had on average significantly fewer cases of the coronavirus than the rest, Hyder found.

At Hale's Ales & Kitchen, just over the Hilliard line where there is no mask requirement, patrons are asked to wear a face covering voluntarily if they haven't been vaccinated, workers there said. Chris Hale, the owner, did not return phone calls seeking comment.

Even when Ohio's elected municipal officials have stepped in to adopt public health strategies of their own, controversies sometimes have swirled.

In August, the village of Gambier, home to Kenyon College, approved a temporary mask requirement for public buildings, including schools, with a \$25 fine for violators. The county sheriff posted on his Facebook page that he had spoken with the mayor "and informed him that deputies will not be citing anyone for violations."

Sheriff David Shaffer's Facebook announcement drew more than 700 replies, mirroring the fevered views that divide the nation over public health during the pandemic.

"So ... you are elected to decide which law to enforce?" one woman wrote.

Many praised the sheriff. "The more you protect our God-given freedoms," one man wrote, "the greater my respect for you. ... Please continue to defy tyrants who are trying to destroy our freedom."

Such sentiment — and the Ohio law it yielded — leave the state's health officials feeling impotent as each pandemic wave arrives.

In September, Jack Pepper, administrator of the Athens City-County Health Department, worried as his southeastern Ohio jurisdiction, which contains both historical Ohio University and rural poverty, suffered the largest surge in coronavirus hospitalizations and deaths of the pandemic so far.

"It would have been nice," Pepper said, if the department could have limited the number of patrons in restaurants, as it had when establishments reopened after a pandemic shutdown early on. "Those powers are all gone."

"In a perfect world," Pepper said, "we would be able to do what we think is best, but that's not our reality. So we deal with the hand we've been dealt."

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HEADLINE	12/26 Seven principles of Kwanzaa
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.cnn.com/2021/12/26/us/kwanzaa-seven-principles-cec/index.html">https://www.cnn.com/2021/12/26/us/kwanzaa-seven-principles-cec/index.html</a>
GIST	<p>(CNN)Christmas might be over, but <a href="#">Kwanzaa</a> is just getting started.</p> <p>Today marks the start of Kwanzaa, also spelled Kwanza (with one 'a' at the end). It's a seven-day non-religious holiday observed in the US, meant to <a href="#">honor African Americans' ancestral roots</a>. The celebration lasts until January 1.</p> <p>The name comes from the Swahili phrase "matunda ya kwanza," which means "first fruits."</p> <p>Created in 1966 by Maulana Karenga, a Black nationalist and professor of Pan-African studies at California State University at Long Beach, Kwanzaa became popular in the 1980s and 1990s in tandem with the Black Power movement -- making up the trio of winter holidays along with Hanukkah and Christmas.</p> <p>The holiday is defined by Nguzo Saba, or the seven principles. Each day of the festival is dedicated to a specific principle, marked by lighting a new candle on the kinara, a seven-branched candelabra.</p> <p>Even though Kwanzaa isn't as widely celebrated as it used to be, its seven principles still hold true for some. Here's a look at what those principles are, and what they mean.</p> <p><b>Umoja</b> Umoja means unity in Swahili.</p>

Karenga defines this [on his Kwanzaa website](#) as: "To strive for and maintain unity in the family, community, nation and race."

### **Kujichagulia**

Or self-determination. This principle refers to defining, naming, creating and speaking for oneself.

### **Ujima**

Translated as "collective work and responsibility," ujima refers to uplifting your community.

"To build and maintain our community together and make our brother's and sister's problems our problems and to solve them together," Karenga writes.

### **Ujamaa**

Cooperative economics. Similar to ujima, this principle refers to uplifting your community economically.

"To build and maintain our own stores, shops and other businesses and to profit from them together," he writes.

### **Nia**

Nia means purpose.

Karenga expands on this principle with, "To make our collective vocation the building and developing of our community in order to restore our people to their traditional greatness."

### **Kuumba**

Meaning "creativity," Karenga defines this principle as "To do always as much as we can, in the way we can, in order to leave our community more beautiful and beneficial than we inherited it."

### **Imani**

The final principle translates to "faith."

Karenga defines this as faith in community, writing, "To believe with all our heart in our people, our parents, our teachers, our leaders and the righteousness and victory of our struggle."

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HEADLINE	12/26 Travel increases risks Covid infection
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.cnn.com/2021/12/26/health/us-coronavirus-sunday/index.html">https://www.cnn.com/2021/12/26/health/us-coronavirus-sunday/index.html</a>
GIST	<p>(CNN)For <a href="#">Americans traveling</a> after Christmas and New Year's, getting their Covid-19 vaccinations or booster doses as soon as possible is critical to safely avoid serious illness, one health expert told CNN Saturday.</p> <p>Amid a surge of cases nationwide fueled by the <a href="#">Omicron coronavirus variant</a> before the holiday season, parts of the country are reporting <a href="#">increased hospitalizations</a> and deaths. And people need to be prepared for a heightened risk of infection during travel by taking preventative measures, according to Dr. Peter Hotez, dean of the school of tropical medicine at Baylor College of Medicine.</p> <p>"If you've only gotten two doses of the Pfizer or Moderna vaccine, even though that officially counts as fully vaccinated, we know that its impact on breakthrough symptomatic illness is close to zero," Hotez told CNN's Amara Walker Saturday.</p> <p>The initial two-dose regiment will still protect "better for serious illness," he said, "but you still need to get boosted, I think, if you want to travel safely."</p> <p>Booster shots may take two weeks to provide <a href="#">peak immunity</a>, doctors have said, meaning the sooner one gets vaccinated, the better. Other steps, including wearing a <a href="#">quality mask</a>, can help lower risk of infection.</p>

Millions of Americans who are immunocompromised should delay future travel plans for a few weeks if possible in the hope that the current surge won't span as long as previous ones, Hotez said.

And due to the infectiousness of Omicron, "even if you're boosted, you have to face the possibility that you could get symptomatic breakthrough illness going through airports and going on Ubers," he said.

The US has fully vaccinated nearly 62% of its total population, leaving millions unvaccinated at higher risk for serious illness and death from Covid-19, according to data from the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. And more than 31% of those inoculated have received additional doses or boosters.

Even though early research indicates that Omicron may cause less severe illness than the Delta variant, the recently detected strain is highly contagious and threatens to strain health care resources, officials and experts have warned. A hallmark of the season has been the shortage of Covid-19 testing kits -- a crucial tool in attempting to assuage the fast-moving virus.

Dr. Jeremy Faust, an emergency physician at Brigham and Women's Hospital in Boston, said while there's always a risk to contract the virus while traveling, there are mitigation efforts available.

"So if someone has been exposed in your orbit or in your circle, or has been infected, you don't have to assume everybody has it. Do continue to do things like wearing masks around people or testing," Faust told CNN's Boris Sanchez Saturday.

And for those traveling, Faust advises to look for "the weak links in the chain."

"It's not necessarily the actual airplane itself. It might be the airport line in the bathroom where you need to be extra careful with masks and other mitigation measures," he said. "And I think depending on your threshold, you have to adjust accordingly."

### **Treatment options narrow for Omicron**

With millions traveling, Omicron was also partially responsible for the [Christmas weekend cancellations](#) of about 1,700 flights within, into or out of the US, according to aviation tracking website FlightAware.

Airlines, including Delta and United, have said they are experiencing staffing shortages due to Omicron, which became the [dominant strain](#) in the US last week as officials announced a new wave of measures to combat the spread.

And as for fighting Omicron, currently there is one monoclonal antibody treatment that is still expected to be effective against the strain, the US Food and Drug Administration said Thursday in a statement.

It is "unlikely" that the treatment known as REGEN-COV or the combined use of bamlanivimab and etesevimab "will retain activity" against Omicron, according to the statement. That means sotrovimab is the sole monoclonal antibody treatment currently available to fight the Omicron variant.

The Office of the Assistant Secretary for Preparedness and Response has moved to halt allocations of the other monoclonal antibody therapies and that 300,000 additional doses of sotrovimab will be available in January, the agency said.

The US is also [experiencing a shortage](#) of the monoclonal antibody treatment Evusheld, which will only be given to people who have compromised immune systems and do not have active Covid-19 infections. Federal officials purchased up to 700,000 doses of the preventative drug -- enough to help only one-tenth of the estimated seven million people who are eligible.



HEADLINE	12/24 Essential workers hit again omicron spread
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.cbsnews.com/news/covid-19-omicron-essential-workers/">https://www.cbsnews.com/news/covid-19-omicron-essential-workers/</a>
GIST	<p>With the latest <a href="#">coronavirus</a> wave upending another holiday season, frontline employees are feeling a disturbing sense of déjà vu. The soaring number of U.S. infections linked to the <a href="#">Omicron variant</a> has only deepened the crisis among essential workers, many of whom report being demoralized, abused, underpaid and exhausted as the pandemic trudges into its second year.</p> <p>As 2021 comes to a close, workers in health care, transportation, retail, food services and other key sectors are again falling prey to COVID-19, leaving already diminished workforces to pick up the slack. The shortages are leading to <a href="#">hundreds of canceled flights</a>, closed eateries and short-staffed retail stores. Above all, workers speak of a renewed sense of fatigue and frustration.</p> <p>"We don't have enough hands. Everybody is working as much as they physically and mentally can," Judy Snarsky, a grocery worker in Massachusetts, told the Associated Press. "Some of us have been going like a freight train."</p> <p>The supermarket where she works on Cape Cod is down to about 100 workers from its normal level of 150, and Snarsky has been working 50 hours a week while picking up extra tasks due to understaffing, the 59-year-old said.</p> <p><b>"I get really bad anxiety"</b></p> <p>At CityMD, rising COVID-19 cases among staff has pushed the New York-area chain of private urgent-care clinics to close <a href="#">1 in 10 locations</a> this week. New York City's public hospital system has made nearly all clinic visits this week virtual in order to free up nurses for hospitals and testing sites, Gothamist <a href="#">reported</a>.</p> <p>"I am concerned about a loss of staff due to Omicron," said Mitchell Katz, the hospital system's CEO.</p> <p>Michelle Gonzalez, a nurse at New York's Montefiore Medical Center in the Bronx, said that she and her intensive care unit colleagues never truly had a break from COVID-19, while the arrival of Omicron has only intensified the stress.</p> <p>"Prior to work, I get really bad anxiety," she said. "If I've been off for two days, I will come back in a panic because I don't know what I'm walking into."</p> <p>At least seven states in the Midwest and Northeast have called in hundreds of <a href="#">National Guard members</a> to help fill labor gaps in hospitals and nursing homes, where they serve meals, transport patients and perform other nonclinical work.</p> <p>Unions representing health care workers gripe that far too many hospitals failed to fill staff vacancies or to retain pandemic-weary staff. For example, there are 1,500 nursing vacancies in New York's three largest hospitals alone — about double the number at the onset of the pandemic, said Carl Ginsberg, a spokesman for the 42,000-member New York State Nurses Association.</p> <p>"There are not enough nurses to do the job right, and so there are situations where the units have dangerous conditions, where patients are in jeopardy," Ginsberg told the AP.</p> <p>To deal with the shortage, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention recommended allowing health care workers who test positive for COVID-19 to <a href="#">return to work sooner</a> as long as they don't have symptoms. (Countries including Spain and the U.K. have made similar moves.)</p> <p>In West Virginia, Governor Jim Justice outlined a plan to recruit and train more than 2,000 new nurses over the next four years, using \$48 million of federal funds to help.</p> <p>Meanwhile, long-term care facilities are bracing for a possible surge in COVID-19 cases driven by Omicron. Worsening matters is that their workforce is 15% smaller than before the pandemic, according to</p>

Rachel Reeves, a spokesperson for the American Health Care Association and the National Center for Assisted Living.

"Caregivers are burned out," she said. "Not only have many experienced tremendous loss — it has been exhausting, physically and emotionally, battling this virus day in and day out."

### **Canceled flights, fewer cops**

COVID-19 is again wreaking havoc among public-facing workers in transportation and safety. United, Delta and other U.S. airlines have [canceled more than 600 flights](#) on Christmas Eve because so many workers were out sick.

"The nationwide spike in Omicron cases this week has had a direct impact on our flight crews and the people who run our operation," a United Airlines spokesperson said in a statement.

The airline industry has urged the government to relax quarantine protocols, citing the impact that the ongoing wave of illness might have on its workforce.

"As with health care, police, fire and public transportation workforces, the Omicron surge may exacerbate personnel shortages and create significant disruptions to our workforce and operations," Airlines for America, the industry group, wrote to the CDC on Wednesday.

In New York, about 2,700 [police officers](#) were absent earlier this week — twice the number who are ill on an average day. In Seattle, the police force is down about 300 officers from its usual force of 1,350, according to Officer Mike Solan, who leads the city's police union.

"It's difficult for our community because they're waiting for that call for help," Solan said. "And then we're at risk because we don't have the proper safe numbers to have a safe working environment when we answer that call for help."

### **Retail on the line**

Many smaller businesses such as nail salons, restaurants, stores and event spaces are bracing for a hit if the situation deteriorates. There's already been a [drop in hours worked](#) in the leisure and hospitality industries, according to an analysis from Homebase, a software provider to small and midsize businesses.

The 10 U.S. counties that rely most on tourism — a group that includes Anaheim, California; Orlando, Florida; New York; and Washington, D.C. — saw 25% fewer hours worked last week, Jason Greenberg, Homebase's head economist, told CBS MoneyWatch.

In New York, more than 30 restaurants abruptly [closed last week](#) when staff and patrons tested positive for the virus, and closures have also hit the [Bay Area](#), [Chicago](#) and [Houston](#).

Trophy Brewing in Raleigh, North Carolina, cut its operating hours and decided to close three of the business' four locations early on New Year's Eve, said David Lockwood, the company's co-owner. In Washington, D.C., DogMa Daycare & Boarding For Dogs said this week that it was canceling all day care until January 3 because several staff members tested positive for COVID-19.

### **Overworked and underpaid**

The decision to close a business — or for an employee to call in sick from work — is a tough one in a season that historically has been a big moneymaker for eateries and retail stores.

While some service workers have seen pay increases amid the yearlong labor shortage, and some states and cities have offered bonuses to frontline workers, nearly all of those pay gains have been [eaten up by rising inflation](#).

Most cooks, bartenders and grocery workers who fall sick or have to quarantine will lose money since about two-thirds of them don't have access to paid sick leave.

	<p>"Realistically, retail workers don't have many options," Marc Perrone, president of the United Food and Commercial Workers International union, <a href="#">told</a> "Good Morning America." "One day off is 20% of their income, and a lot of them — based on the wages that they're making — they can't afford to do that."</p> <p>Daniel Schneider, a Harvard University professor focused on low-income workers, said the public should keep in mind that essential workers simply don't have the luxury of working from home, as some Americans do.</p> <p>"White-collar workers need to appreciate the real risks that these folks take," he told the AP. "You can't ring up groceries from home. You can't stock shelves from home."</p>
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HEADLINE	<b>12/25 Christmas winter storm: rain, snow; West</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.cbsnews.com/news/winter-storm-california-west-christmas/">https://www.cbsnews.com/news/winter-storm-california-west-christmas/</a>
GIST	<p>Parts of California are getting a White Christmas after all, with snowfall pounding mountains across the state.</p> <p>Other areas of California, however, saw a wet and rainy Christmas as storms continue to drench the state, causing flash flooding and evacuations in some areas over the holiday period.</p> <p>At Donner Pass in the Sierra Nevada, officials with the University of California, Berkeley's <a href="#">Central Sierra Snow Laboratory wondered on Twitter</a> if the recent snowfall could break the snowiest December record of 179 inches (4.6 meters) set in 1970.</p> <p>There's been at least 119 inches (3 meters) recorded so far this month <a href="#">, according to The Mercury News</a>, with more expected over the next 72 hours.</p> <p>The snowpack in the Sierra was at dangerously low levels after recent weeks of dry weather but <a href="#">the state Department of Water Resources</a> reported on Christmas Eve that the snowpack was between 114% and 137% of normal across the range with more snow expected.</p> <p>In the San Bernardino National Forest, crews are working on a \$4.2 million emergency project to repair a section of State Route 18 that washed down a hillside late Thursday after heavy rain, according to <a href="#">The San Bernardino Sun</a>.</p> <p>The roadway is a major route to Big Bear Lake and the closure near Panorama Point could be "several days if not weeks," the newspaper reported.</p> <p>The Los Angeles area is likely to see rain and mountain snow for the next week, according to the <a href="#">National Weather Service</a>, with temperatures significantly below normal through the middle of the week.</p> <p><a href="#">The San Diego region</a> should see scattered showers, with heavy snow in the San Bernardino and Riverside County mountains, with precipitation possibly going into Thursday.</p> <p>Meanwhile, the San Francisco Bay Area is predicted to have rain showers through Monday before cold and drier conditions arrive through the middle of next week, <a href="#">the weather service said</a>.</p> <p>The storms across the West, which could drop rain and snow over much of the region into next week and plunge the Pacific Northwest into a lengthy cold snap, follow a now-departed atmospheric river that delivered copious amounts of precipitation earlier this week.</p> <p>Rain and snow records broke in Nevada and state officials in Oregon declared an emergency ahead of the freezing temperatures, snow and ice.</p>

	<p>Recent forecasts show at least an inch of snow is likely to fall Sunday in the Seattle and Portland regions, which don't typically see snow.</p> <p>But forecasters and state officials say the main concern is cold temperatures in the region, with daytime highs next week struggling to reach above freezing, that are likely to impact people experiencing homelessness and those without adequate access to heating.</p> <p>In Arizona, a winter weather advisory remained in effect Saturday through the weekend in the upper elevations of the mountains north of the Grand Canyon near the Colorado line. But the wet weather that dumped record-breaking rain on Phoenix and Flagstaff on Friday was moving out of the area.</p> <p>The 1.67 inches (4.2 centimeters) of rain that fell at the airport in Flagstaff on Friday shattered the old record of 0.87 inches (2.2 centimeters) set in 2019. The inch (2.5 centimeters) that was recorded in Phoenix Friday broke the old record of 0.93 of an inch (2.4 centimeters) in 1944.</p> <p>It also was the wettest day for the city since February 22, 2020, when just over an inch fell.</p>
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HEADLINE	<b>12/26 France virus infections spike over holidays</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://apnews.com/article/coronavirus-pandemic-science-health-pandemics-france-7b8135c0465d27a4be0c580f74b74b00">https://apnews.com/article/coronavirus-pandemic-science-health-pandemics-france-7b8135c0465d27a4be0c580f74b74b00</a>
GIST	<p>PARIS (AP) — France has recorded more than 100,000 virus infections in a single day for the first time since the pandemic struck, and COVID-19 hospitalizations have doubled over the past month as the fast-spreading omicron variant complicates the government's efforts to stave off a new lockdown.</p> <p>More than 1 person in 100 in the Paris region has tested positive in the past week, according to the regional health service. Most new infections are linked to the omicron variant, which government experts predict will be dominant in France in the coming days.</p> <p>Meanwhile a surge in delta variant infections in recent months is pushing up hospital admissions. More than 1,000 people in France with the virus died over the past week, bringing the overall death toll to more than 122,000.</p> <p>The government is holding emergency meetings Monday to discuss next steps. Some scientists and educators have urged delaying the post-holiday return to school, or re-imposing a curfew.</p> <p>But the education minister says schools should open as usual Jan. 3, and other government officials are working to avoid measures that would hammer the economic recovery.</p> <p>Instead the government is hoping that stepped-up vaccinations will be enough. The government is pushing a draft law that would require vaccination to enter all restaurants and many public venues, instead of the current health pass system which allows people to produce a negative test or proof of recovery if they're not vaccinate</p>
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HEADLINE	<b>12/26 Hot market: white-collar salaries start rise</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.wsj.com/articles/in-hot-job-market-salaries-start-to-swell-for-white-collar-workers-11640514607?mod=hp_lead_pos4">https://www.wsj.com/articles/in-hot-job-market-salaries-start-to-swell-for-white-collar-workers-11640514607?mod=hp_lead_pos4</a>
GIST	<p>Salaried employees are joining hourly workers in getting hefty raises, thanks to the hot job market and inflationary pressures that are also boosting pay for workers including waiters and warehouse staff.</p> <p>U.S. professionals toward the end of this year saw their compensation jump at the fastest rate in nearly 20 years, federal data show. Hanging over bigger paychecks is the specter of inflation running near an annual</p>

rate of 7%, the highest in 39 years, meaning rising prices will cut into and in some cases decimate the real value of wage gains.

Wages for all private-sector workers grew 4.6% year over year in the third quarter, according to federal data, with the biggest gains going to workers in service occupations and industries such as retail and hospitality.

For management, business and financial occupations, wages rose 3.9% in the quarter, slower than overall wage growth but still the fastest pace on record since 2003 for this bucket of workers.

A survey from the Conference Board earlier this month found that employers are setting aside an average 3.9% of total payroll for [wage increases next year](#), the most since 2008.

“Candidates are turning down our offers or wanting to negotiate more aggressively than they did in the past,” said Kathie Patterson, chief human resources officer at [Ally Financial](#) Inc. The Detroit-based lender is raising its salary and bonus pools, and increased its contribution to employee 401(k) accounts.

For many college-educated workers, 2021 will close with big bonus payouts and raises in sectors such as finance, law and technology. That group has enjoyed rising pay for decades as wages for workers without degrees stagnated or lost ground, according to academic research drawing on government data.

Pay for entry-level analysts at major investment banks moved into the six figures earlier this year, and associates at dozens of corporate law firms got pay increases after Milbank LLP [lifted salaries in June](#) for new lawyers to \$200,000 from \$190,000.

In finance, “There’s been so much pressure on pay,” said Alan Johnson, managing director of Johnson Associates, a compensation-consulting firm focused on [financial services](#). “My clients are understaffed. With Covid, they curtailed hiring, and now with a spike in the economy and markets, they’re working people very, very hard,” he added.

All of that, Mr. Johnson said, heightens employees’ expectations that they will be well-compensated for the added stress and work. Banks are paying up with salary adjustments along with bonuses that are 10% to 35% higher than last year, according to a study by Johnson Associates.

Economists are concerned about [a wage-price spiral](#) in which employers raise pay, then pass along the increased costs to customers in the form of higher prices, leading workers to ask for higher pay to offset rising prices, and so on. Yet compensation experts and human-resources executives say the current increases are driven primarily by traditional labor-market dynamics and secondarily by inflation.

Robust consumer demand for a range of products including holiday gifts, mortgages and appliances has amplified the need for workers. At the same time, the supply of workers has dropped because of a high rate of retirements and millions of people sitting on the sidelines of the workforce because of burnout, Covid-19 fears and child-care issues, among other reasons.

Amanda Richardson decided this year to give 10% raises to all U.S. employees at CoderPad, a software company. The increase, for around 40 staffers, will be divided into two 5% increases, one in April 2022 and the other in October, “so it feels like you’re continuously getting a raise,” said Ms. Richardson, CoderPad’s chief executive. Last year CoderPad gave employees two 3% increases.

She settled on 10% after her finance chief attended a gathering with peer companies. When the subject of compensation came up, a consensus quickly emerged among attendees that 10% raises were needed to keep up with both inflation and the demands of highly sought after tech talent. Her first reaction: “That’s crazy.” Then, “We put it in the budget,” she said. “If we’re in a peer group where companies are talking about 10%, our employees will get it somewhere else if we don’t give it,” she added.

Beth Klem, a CoderPad employee, moved with her daughter from the San Francisco Bay Area to North Carolina early in the [Covid-19 pandemic](#) to be closer to family, saying she thought she would also benefit from a lower cost of living. Some of her expenses today are higher than she expected, such as her food bill. A 10% increase is “significant enough to feel like it has an impact on my budget,” said Ms. Klem, 45 years old.

Pressure on wages surged late in the year, said Irina Konstantinovsky, chief human resources officer at [Horizon Therapeutics](#) PLC, an 1,800-person biotechnology company with U.S. headquarters in Deerfield, Ill. She initially asked her board’s compensation committee to approve a 5% increase in next year’s salary budget for raises, pay adjustments and promotions, but upped that request to 6% after gathering new data on inflation and market pay rates.

Horizon has also increased its 401(k) match and gives every employee equity and a bonus. Though turnover is low, Ms. Konstantinovsky said, “It’s a risk for every company right now, so we can’t fall behind.”

Still, many workers nationwide won’t see their paychecks [stay ahead of inflation](#) this year. For one thing, “Companies don’t respond to market demands on a dime,” said Diane Burton, academic director of the Institute for Compensation Studies at Cornell University’s ILR School.

Most companies go through an extensive salary-planning process once a year, limiting their abilities to adjust to short-term conditions. Cost-of-living adjustments were once common in collective-bargaining agreements and have been making a comeback in union contracts and minimum-wage laws.

Many firms are reluctant to adjust salaries based on a volatile factor such as inflation since salary increases are nearly impossible to roll back. Instead, employers report using variable pay, such as sign-on bonuses and spot allowances, to provide a temporary income lift without incurring the continuing costs of inflation-driven salary increases.

Some companies have already determined that inflation, which until this year was mostly between 1% and 3% annually over the past decade, won’t drive salary decisions. In early December, Google’s parent, [Alphabet](#) Inc., already known as a company paying at the top end of local market rates for talent, said it wouldn’t give workers across-the-board adjustments to account for inflation.

The railroad company [Union Pacific](#) Corp. is planning raises averaging around 4% to 6% for nonunion staff, according to a person familiar with the situation. Union Pacific declined to comment.

“What we see typically is that employers set wages based on the cost of labor, which is based on supply and demand for roles,” not based on inflation, said Lauren Mason, who advises clients on talent and employee management as a senior principal at the consulting firm Mercer.

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HEADLINE	12/26 ‘Fully vaccinated’ definition changing?
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.wsj.com/articles/as-omicron-spreads-what-it-means-to-be-fully-vaccinated-is-changing-11640514603?mod=hp_lead_pos2">https://www.wsj.com/articles/as-omicron-spreads-what-it-means-to-be-fully-vaccinated-is-changing-11640514603?mod=hp_lead_pos2</a>
GIST	<p>Omicron is changing the definition of what it means to be fully vaccinated, because early studies suggest that current Covid-19 vaccines will require three doses <a href="#">to offer sufficient protection</a> against the variant.</p> <p>Yet given resistance to vaccinations, requiring a booster dose could be a thorny decision for policy makers and health authorities.</p> <p>A booster shot is already becoming a fact of life at some places, however. More than 75 universities have required boosters for students returning to campus in the winter, according to data compiled by the Chronicle of Higher Education. New Mexico mandated the extra dose for some state employees.</p>



[Molson Coors Beverage](#) Co. recently [decided to implement a booster requirement](#) for U.S. employees after instituting a vaccine mandate in August.

“Omicron has made the need for three shots more of an acute critical matter because vaccine efficacy and effectiveness drops further,” said Eric Topol, director of the Scripps Research Translational Institute in La Jolla, Calif.

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention Director Rochelle Walensky said Wednesday that the agency is looking at changing the definition of what it means to be fully vaccinated. Yet people familiar with the deliberations said the agency was unlikely to make a change soon.

The Biden administration wants to encourage boosters, but changing the definition of what it means to be fully vaccinated would be complicated because it would affect vaccine mandates that are being challenged in courts, one of the people said.

Adding to the practical challenges of taking official action is that children under 16 years aren’t currently eligible for boosters, the people said.

The administration is also discussing whether to stop using the phrase “fully vaccinated” and replace it with “up-to-date,” which may make it easier for people to understand that Covid-19 shots are a regular part of life, people familiar with the matter said.

The CDC uses the terminology when referring to other kinds of regular vaccinations that aren’t related to Covid-19.

Until now, health authorities have defined fully vaccinated as getting two doses of the vaccine from either Moderna Inc. or Pfizer Inc. and partner BioNTech SE, or one dose of Johnson & Johnson’s shot.

People who got the Pfizer-BioNTech and Moderna vaccines are eligible for boosters at least six months past their second shot, while J&J vaccine recipients are eligible for boosters two months after their primary dose.

Yet some experts said the need for an additional dose crystallized in August, when some vaccinated people began getting breakthrough Delta infections resulting in moderate to severe illness.

“As we get into the issue with Omicron, it’s going to become equally apparent that three doses are going to be very important,” said Michael Osterholm, an epidemiologist at the University of Minnesota.

Pfizer-BioNTech and Moderna have released [lab studies](#) in recent days indicating a third dose of their messenger RNA vaccines is needed to maintain antibody levels [for neutralizing the virus](#).

The Pfizer-BioNTech and [AstraZeneca](#) PLC vaccines were estimated to be no more than 20% effective against symptomatic Omicron infection, while a booster shot was projected to raise efficacy to 55% to 80%, [according to Imperial College London researchers](#).

Gigi Gronvall, a professor at the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health, said a third dose improves the quality and quantity of peoples’ antibodies, helping to decrease the incidence of severe disease.

“The vaccines are not a bug zapper that prevents the virus from getting into you. You will get exposed, the virus will start making copies of itself, and it’s a matter of, is your immune system prepared to shut that down?” she said.

Among the universities instituting booster mandates for students returning to campus are American University, Cornell University and the University of Michigan.

American University President Sylvia Burwell said in a note to students and faculty that the university is requiring boosters starting Feb. 10 because of factors including increasing Covid-19 transmission in Washington, D.C., large numbers of people six months past their second shot, holiday travel and the emergence of the Omicron variant.

“As the weather gets colder and people gather indoors, getting a Covid-19 vaccine or booster can help protect you and those around you,” she said.

New York’s Metropolitan Opera said it is requiring all staff, performers and audience members to get a booster to attend a performance, starting Jan. 17. The L.A. Music Center, including venues such as Walt Disney Concert Hall and the Ahmanson Theatre, said it would require boosters for audience members and staff who are eligible.

Danny Meyer, head of Union Square Hospitality Group, said on CNBC Wednesday that his restaurants such as Gramercy Tavern and Union Square Cafe would require customers to show proof of a booster to dine indoors, and employees and new hires must also receive boosters.

A survey of 200 major employers conducted earlier this month by [Gartner](#) found 8% of the businesses are redefining what it means to be fully vaccinated and are requiring workers to get booster shots.

About 50% of the surveyed employers said they have or plan to institute vaccine requirements.

It could be tougher for the federal government to require a booster, given the opposition to the existing vaccine mandate, analysts said.

The Supreme Court [has scheduled a special hearing next month](#) to assess the legality of a vaccine or testing mandate aimed at large employers and a vaccination requirement for certain healthcare workers.

If the U.S. changes the definition of fully vaccinated to include three shots, the Biden administration’s vaccine or testing requirement would likely require millions more people to get tested every week because only a minority of vaccinated Americans have gotten the extra dose, said Larry Levitt, executive vice president at the Kaiser Family Foundation.

Such a move would also be challenging because most people aren’t eligible for booster doses until six months after their second shot.

“A requirement in workplaces or entertainment settings for a booster would certainly boost boosters, but it would take time and there would be chaos in the interim,” Mr. Levitt said.

President Biden and other senior administration officials have been urging people to get the extra dose as the best defense against Omicron.

“Boosters provide the strongest protection,” Mr. Biden said on Tuesday, as he announced new measures to confront Omicron such as adding thousands of new vaccination sites to make boosters more accessible. “Unfortunately, we still have tens of millions eligible for booster shots who have not yet gotten them.”

In the U.S., 62% of the population is fully vaccinated, but less than one-fifth have gotten a booster shot, according to the CDC.

A survey of 1,065 adults published this week by the Kaiser Family Foundation found that half of the vaccinated adults who haven’t yet received a booster dose said they were more likely to get one given the recent Omicron news.

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HEADLINE	12/26 Guilt, frustration of breakthrough Covid
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2021/dec/26/breakthrough-covid-omicron-guilt-frustration">https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2021/dec/26/breakthrough-covid-omicron-guilt-frustration</a>

When Sean Williams, 50, caught a breakthrough case of Covid-19 in November, he felt guilty and embarrassed. His 14-year-old tested positive, too; both were “double-vaxxed” and probably caught it from his 11-year-old daughter, who got it in school two days before her scheduled first vaccination.

“It’s impossible to talk about without going through this whole tortured thing about how careful you were before you got it,” says Williams, who lives with his family in New York City. “Also, this horrible feeling that you have to stutter your way through a clarification that you do believe in science, you did get vaccinated, you’re, like, not a fascist, even. It’s landmines all the way down.”

When people who were fully vaccinated against Covid began testing positive for the virus in greater numbers during the rise of the Delta variant, it threw a wrench in the CDC’s summertime declaration that the pandemic was merely “a pandemic of the unvaccinated”. Instead, breakthrough cases proved that vaccines are both extremely helpful and imperfect in stopping the spread of illness. Mass vaccination is imperative; individual vaccination isn’t enough.

Absent clear government guidance or the infrastructure to support overlapping safety measures, vaccinated individuals have been left on their own to decide what “responsible” pandemic behavior should look like, beyond getting the vaccine. After testing positive for a breakthrough infection, many find themselves left to defend or reevaluate their actions. Now, as the Omicron variant accelerates a new seasonal surge – and fast-rising breakthrough cases – people are more frustrated and confused than ever.

### **‘I was really ashamed’**

Williams wasn’t alone in feeling that a breakthrough Covid diagnosis was “landmines all the way down” when it came to the responsibility to notify contacts and the anticipatory anxiety of disappointing a community, or being judged for making what only in hindsight felt like a not-cautious-enough call. Many people reported feeling guilt or shame over having possibly put others at risk without intending to.

Liam Neess, a 29-year-old auto mechanic in Cincinnati, Ohio, tested positive about six months after his second Pfizer shot. He was about to embark on a 10-day road trip to attend two weddings, and was disappointed to have to skip the first of them. He worried that he would also have to miss the second, his sister’s, which he was supposed to officiate.

“The process of telling people I had tested positive, telling them they should get tested, was vastly less stressful than the implication of how it was going to impact my family,” Neess says. But it still “was a pretty jarring experience”, and he felt uncomfortable knowing his co-workers were at risk and that he had to inform any of the shop’s clients that may have had contact with him. If his co-workers tested positive for the virus, the shop would have needed to shut down.

Discomfort aside, Neess felt that disclosing his Covid status was a matter of social etiquette and ethics. “Apart from the sort of queasiness you get from inconveniencing someone, it was a ‘bite the bullet and just get it over with’ kind of thing,” he says. Ultimately, Neess got two negative test results the day before his sister’s wedding, and all his co-workers tested negative as well.

Neess’ apprehension deeply resonates for Jess, 32, who lives in Pennsylvania and caught a breakthrough case in September.

“I was so nervous to tell contacts and even my family who I didn’t have contact with,” says Jess.

Jess assumes she caught the virus when she attended a small, ticketed event that involved 18 people seated near each other, unmasked, over a period of about three hours. It was the only time she had relaxed her generally strict personal safety protocols of masking and social distancing. She took a risk that night because she was vaccinated – and because she felt like it had been so long since she let herself do something like that.

“Once I found out I tested positive, I was really ashamed about the fact that I put myself in that risky situation and didn’t want anyone to find that that’s where I got it,” says Jess, who asked that the Guardian

publish only her first name to protect the privacy of the others who attended the event. She even considered lying about having attended an unmasked, indoor gathering. When she ultimately decided to tell the truth, it “wasn’t as big of a deal” as she’d initially feared.

“Getting through a pandemic requires coming together and taking coordinated action,” says Dr Julia Raifman, an assistant professor at the Boston University School of Public Health. “Everybody’s actions affect other people. In this context, that’s what government is for: to lead us in coordinating our actions to do what’s most important to contain spread.”

In lieu of such leadership from elected officials, Raifman is sympathetic to people like Jess and Neess, who are doing their best to balance living a decent life and making responsible choices with ever-changing, complex and often incomplete information after nearly two years of an unparalleled and traumatic pandemic experience. “It’s a pandemic of people who are being underserved by the government, and that includes everybody,” Raifman says.

#### **‘Was it worth it? I don’t know’**

Aaron Ghitelman, 30, caught breakthrough Covid during a weekend of back-to-back concerts for the band, Phish, in August. He had been attending Phish shows for a decade, and wanted to share the experience with his girlfriend for the first time. “It was so stupid,” he says in retrospect, the self-reproach immediately present in his voice.

Ghitelman and his girlfriend had planned to self-isolate for a bit when they returned home to New York City, but they hadn’t planned for a full quarantine. After testing positive, the pair had to scramble to cancel plans and tell people. Ghitelman also immediately announced his Covid status on social media, though he felt anxious about potential blowback. His sense of social responsibility was, however, bigger than the sheepishness he felt.

Looking back, Ghitelman still can’t say with certainty if he would have done anything differently knowing what he does now. Though he had what amounted to a mild case of Covid, it was unlike any illness he’d experienced before. On the other hand, the concerts brought him a long overdue experience of joy.

“The question I ask myself is: ‘If every time I go to a Phish show, I got Covid, would I keep going?’” Ghitelman says. “This is something that means a lot to me, and brings me a lot of joy. This is something I love so much in my life. I want to figure out a way to do it safely and not be consumed by fear.”

Jess expresses similar ambivalence about the decisions that led to her breakthrough case. “In the moment, it feels so good to release your mind from the mental anguish of following the strict protocols,” she says. “For a short moment, I wasn’t stressing about hand sanitizer and staying six feet apart and keeping my mask on. But in the end I got sick, so was it worth it? I don’t know.”

With the apparently highly transmissible Omicron in the picture, “Was it worth it?” is a question that more people will undoubtedly soon be asking themselves – and increasingly, it seems, about choices that feel frustratingly mundane.

“People are frustrated that we’re still here at this point, this long after we’ve had very effective vaccines,” says Raifman. “I think it’s really hard for anybody to make any decision that feels good.”

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HEADLINE	12/25 Christmas roast: temps soar in South, East
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2021/dec/25/christmas-temperature-us-texas-records-south-east">https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2021/dec/25/christmas-temperature-us-texas-records-south-east</a>
GIST	About 200 temperature records in the US may be broken over the next several days as warm air across <a href="#">Texas</a> and the south-east is predicted to bring spring or even summer-like conditions, making Christmas Day likely to be the warmest in 50 to 100 years in some areas.

The temperatures could make this the warmest December on record for many cities in the region including Dallas, Houston, New Orleans, St Louis, Kansas City and Chicago.

In some areas, records have already been broken: Wichita Falls in Texas hit 91F (33C) Friday, and Grandfield, Oklahoma, reached 89F. Both beat their Fourth of July high – back at in the middle of summer. Nor were they alone.

“Dallas, Houston, Oklahoma City and Tulsa, Oklahoma, Little Rock, Arkansas, and Memphis, Tennessee, all stand to match or top the record high for 25 December this Saturday,” [AccuWeather senior meteorologist Brett Anderson](#) said.

The unseasonal heat will bring a forecast high to Dallas on Christmas day of 83F, six degrees under its Fourth of July high. Houston has a forecast high of 81F, which is nine degrees below its Independence Day reading.

While temperatures 5-10 degrees above average are not totally uncommon for a few days, temperatures 10-12 degrees over an extended period – especially for an entire month – are rare. And while individual weather events can’t be blamed on a changing climate, extreme temperatures are more increasingly common because of global heating.

The high temperatures, coupled with low humidity, 25mph winds and minimal predictions for rainfall, have triggered winter wildfire warnings. The [Storm Prediction Center](#) issued an advisory for parts of west Texas and Oklahoma and east Colorado on Sunday.

The warm trend is anticipated to continue through midweek before temperatures come down, but only slightly.

In contrast, western states in the US are experiencing coastal rain and heavy high elevation snowfall and more than 6m people along the California coast under storm warnings that could bring 4in of rainfall throughout the next five days.

Meteorologists say the conditions are caused by Arctic air pushing into the Pacific north-west that have produced a White Christmas for Seattle and Portland, which could see 4 inches of snow on Christmas Day.

Seattle, reported CNN, has only seen snow on Christmas Day nine times in 127 years, while Oregon is in a state of emergency due to the potential for hazardous winter weather conditions and a sustained freeze.

Parts of the north-east US, meanwhile, are under a winter weather advisories, largely due to freezing rain, though New England could see more widespread snowfall by Saturday night.

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HEADLINE	<b>12/25 Blood banks biggest shortage in decade</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.nytimes.com/2021/12/25/world/us-blood-banks-are-experiencing-their-biggest-shortage-in-a-decade.html">https://www.nytimes.com/2021/12/25/world/us-blood-banks-are-experiencing-their-biggest-shortage-in-a-decade.html</a>
GIST	<p>The pandemic has caused many supply-chain bottlenecks in everyday life, but few are as critical as the United States’ ever-shrinking blood banks. For the American Red Cross, which supplies about 40 percent of the nation’s blood, and other nonprofit blood centers, the problem lies mostly at the top of the chain: the diminishing number of healthy donors.</p> <p>“This is the biggest challenge that I’ve seen in my 30 years in the business,” Chris Hrouda, the president of biomedical services at the American Red Cross, said in an interview on Thursday.</p> <p>Donations of blood typically decline at this time of year, when holiday parties, wintry weather, seasonal illnesses, travel, and school and college breaks lead to lower donor turnout. But Mr. Hrouda said this month’s national supply had dipped to levels that the Red Cross has not seen in 10 years.</p>

“We simply like to keep three days of inventory,” he said. “We’re struggling to keep one day.” Blood takes up to three days to be tested and prepared for patients.

Remote work, blood drive cancellations, and the limits that colleges and businesses have placed on the number of people allowed in public spaces have all reduced donor turnout.

“We just didn’t get as much access as we had hoped for this fall,” Mr. Hrouda said.

Compounding the problem, the Red Cross, like many employers, is struggling to attract and retain employees amid the pandemic.

The critical shortage leaves hospitals to more carefully allocate the precious resource. “We have not had to delay any cases yet, but we are very mindful of what our blood supply is,” said Dr. Jennifer Andrews, the medical director of the Vanderbilt University Medical Center blood bank in Nashville. Blood donations are essential for surgeries, cancer treatment, chronic illnesses and traumatic injuries.

Vanderbilt, the only level-one trauma center in its region, has recalibrated the transfusions they use to rescue patients — by using fewer red blood cells — to ensure that there is enough for all. “We still think that’s safe, and we know that saves lives,” Dr. Andrews said.

Other hospitals have altered treatment for some patients or canceled some patient surgeries, Red Cross officials said.

At Vanderbilt, “an elective surgery put off today is an emergency surgery tomorrow,” Dr. Andrews said. The medical staff has held two to three blood drives a month, up from one before the pandemic, to help replenish the center’s supplies, she said. But more is needed.

The nation’s blood supply also faced a critical shortage after March 2020 as the first wave of the coronavirus spread across the country. Blood drives were canceled when businesses closed, and many people — especially older Americans, who have traditionally been the most frequent donors — feared going into donation centers. At that time, the F.D.A. eased some restrictions to help reverse the drastic drop in supply.

“We’ve overcome the fear of any sort of risk associated with a blood drive,” said Mr. Hrouda, who noted that the supply had largely bounced back until the Delta variant began spreading last summer. Blood bank directors are hoping that supply will once again catch up to demand.

“Every unit of blood is giving someone life,” Dr. Andrews said. “This holiday season, you can give the gift of life.”

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HEADLINE	<b>12/26 Ukraine nurtures a resistance in waiting</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.nytimes.com/2021/12/26/world/europe/ukraine-russia-civilian-training.html">https://www.nytimes.com/2021/12/26/world/europe/ukraine-russia-civilian-training.html</a>
GIST	<p>KYIV, Ukraine — In a pine forest not far from Ukraine’s capital, a mock battle raged. Commanders barked orders. Figures in camouflage huddled behind trees. A soldier fell to the ground, yelling for help. His cries provided the cue for Anastasia Biloshitska, 25, to run into the line of fire, kneel in the mud and open her medical kit.</p> <p>“People who are prepared won’t panic,” Ms. Biloshitska said.</p> <p>Ms. Biloshitska is one of thousands of Ukrainian civilians who have signed up to learn combat skills in training programs created and run by the government and private paramilitary groups. The programs are part of the country’s strategic defense plan in the event of a potential invasion by Russia — to foster a civilian resistance that can carry on the fight if the Ukrainian military is overwhelmed.</p>



There is no indication that President Vladimir V. Putin of Russia has made up his mind whether to launch an attack. But if one should come, even Ukraine's own generals say their regular military [stands little chance](#) in a full-fledged invasion.

So Ukraine has drawn a lesson from the United States' wars in Iraq and Afghanistan of the past two decades, when guerrillas provided enduring resistance in the face of vastly superior American firepower.

"We have a strong army, but not strong enough to defend against Russia," said Marta Yuzkiv, a doctor working in clinical research, who signed up for training this month. "If we are occupied, and I hope that doesn't happen, we will become the national resistance."

Government-sponsored training for civilians has underpinned Nordic and Swiss military strategies for decades, and is gaining traction as a military doctrine in Eastern Europe.

Spurred on by Russian threats, Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania all have programs encouraging rifle ownership for some civilians and formal training to fight as partisans after an occupation.

Nearly every weekend in Estonia, for example, the [Defense League](#), a self-defense organization, holds exercises in the forests for volunteers, right down to making improvised explosive devices, or I.E.D.'s, the weapon that plagued the United States military in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Civilian defense is not unfamiliar in Ukraine; volunteer brigades formed the backbone of the country's force in the east in 2014, the first year of the war against Russian separatists, when the Ukrainian military was in shambles.

This effort is now being formalized into units of the newly formed Territorial Defense Forces, a part of the military. Last year, the Ukrainian Army began weekend training for civilian volunteers in these units.

The government runs, and pays for, some of the training sessions through the Territorial Defense Forces. Private paramilitary groups like the Ukrainian Legion run other sessions, for which their members pay all the costs. The legion conducted the program in the forest outside Kyiv this month.

The goal is not to achieve victory against the weight of the Russian military, which would be virtually impossible for Ukraine anyway. Rather it is to create the threat of disruption and resistance to an occupying force that would serve as a deterrent to an invasion.

Gen. Anatoliy Barhylevych, deputy commander of Ukraine's ground forces, has said that the country aims to turn out about 100,000 volunteers in the event of conflict. But a spokesman for the Ukrainian Defense Forces said he could not disclose how many people had formally enlisted in the training programs.

Opinion surveys suggest some support for the effort. A [poll](#) this fall, for example, showed 24 percent of Ukrainians saying they would resist "with a weapon in hand" if Russia invaded. Among men, 39 percent said they would resist with weapons. Ukrainians have taken to [posting selfies](#) on social media holding rifles.

Ukrainian commanders say that half a million Ukrainians have military experience, and that they hope many would join a fight, including those belonging to private groups like the Ukrainian Legion.

But skeptics say that this is partly bluster, and that the Ukrainian command could hardly count on a flood of veterans becoming insurgents.

In the forest, shrouded in a bitter-cold morning mist, schoolteachers, accountants, waitresses and programmers spilled out of Toyotas and Fords and made their way to the training sessions.

At one picnic area, the lesson of the day was topical, if nerve-rattling: how to screw a fuse into the slab of high explosives of an anti-tank mine.

“We don’t have many Javelins and the Russians have a lot of tanks,” said Mykhailo Hiraldo-Ramires, the instructor. The Javelin is a type of American anti-tank missile that the United States has provided to the Ukrainian Army in limited numbers. “We will get them with these so-called pancakes instead.”

Mr. Hiraldo-Ramires demonstrated how to install and arm the detonator, using a model of a mine. This requires removing a metal safety ribbon and pushing a button that when depressed makes a startling snapping noise, indicating the mine is armed. After you do that, he said, you should “move back to a safe distance.”

Ihor Gribenoshko, 56, an advertising executive at a pharmaceutical company, took notes. “The more coffins we send back, the more the Russian people will start thinking twice,” he said.

The Ukrainian Legion does not distribute weapons, and instead encourages members to train with their own rifles. It also does not explain how the explosives would wind up in civilian hands. But members said they keep rucksacks in their homes packed with walkie-talkies, medical kits, sleeping bags and warm clothes — ready at a moment’s notice.

Critics point to perils in the plan for civilian defense. One concern is that domestic political divisions could spark violence from armed militias. Some scenarios envision Moscow seizing on this vulnerability, turning nationalist militias into a destabilizing threat to the government.

In an invasion, these groups could “quickly turn into a decentralized insurgency in many parts of the country” a [study](#) of scenarios for war between Ukraine and Russia by the Institute for the Study of War in Washington noted.

Others worry that the effort encourages private gun ownership, which carries risks in crime, suicide and domestic violence. Ukrainian law requires a psychological examination to obtain a gun license. In a country of about 40 million, 1.3 million Ukrainians own licensed civilian firearms, [according to the Interior Ministry](#).

The civilian training include lectures as well as hands-on sessions. This month, the day before the program in the forest, about 100 people filed into a concert hall in an outlying district of Kyiv, griping about the limited on-street parking and lining up at a vending machine for coffee.

They came for a nearly two-hour lecture sponsored by the Territorial Defense Forces on likely plans of attack on Kyiv — including armored columns rolling in on highways or paratroopers seizing the airport — by Lt. Yuri Matviyenko, a former Ukrainian military attaché to Israel.

“Expect a fast storming,” he said. “We won’t have much time.”

He described how the volunteers might resist based on the tactics of Islamist militias in Aleppo, Syria. The volunteers should use their knowledge of their own neighborhoods to move close to the Russian soldiers, leaving too little separation to call in airstrikes or artillery, he said.

The next day, out in the pine forest, Ms. Biloshitska — who studied to be a teacher but is now working as a waitress — examined the man playing the role of a casualty as she trained to provide first aid. It did not look good. Small strips of red duct tape indicated multiple wounds. Pressure was applied. Gauze came out. A mock radio call took place.

“Artillery! One! Two! Three!” an instructor yelled. Ms. Biloshitska tumbled to the ground, taking cover, then sprang back up to stanch the bleeding.

	<p>On a typical weekend, Ms. Biloshitska said, she might read a book, do laundry or meet a friend at a coffee shop. Learning to dress battle wounds was a new experience.</p> <p>Ms. Biloshitska treated an area marked as an exit wound on the man's back. Finally, panting, sweating and surrounded by discarded bandages and medical gloves, she was finished. "How do you feel?" she asked the man.</p> <p>"Terrible," he said. "I was shot in the chest."</p>
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<b>HEADLINE</b>	<b>12/25 India expands vaccinations, starts boosters</b>
<b>SOURCE</b>	<a href="https://www.nytimes.com/live/2021/12/25/world/omicron-covid-vaccine-tests#india-vaccine-boosters">https://www.nytimes.com/live/2021/12/25/world/omicron-covid-vaccine-tests#india-vaccine-boosters</a>
<b>GIST</b>	<p>India is expanding its Covid vaccination drive to include everyone 15 or older and making health workers and some older citizens eligible for booster shots, as the country grapples with the prospect of another wave fueled by the Omicron variant.</p> <p>Prime Minister Narendra Modi, in an address to the nation late on Saturday, said vaccines would available to those 15 to 18 years of age as of Jan 3. He also said booster doses would be offered as a "precaution" to health workers and those 60 years and above with comorbidities starting on Jan 10.</p> <p>India has fully vaccinated about 60 percent of its adult population of roughly 900 million people, while about 90 percent have received at least one dose of vaccine. After a sluggish start marred by mismanagement, the country's vaccination <a href="#">drive picked up pace in recent months</a>. But the government is short of the declared goal of fully vaccinating all adults by the end of the year.</p> <p>About 90 percent of Indians have been vaccinated with Covishield, a locally manufactured version of the Oxford-AstraZeneca vaccine. Initial <a href="#">studies in Britain found</a> that AstraZeneca's vaccinations showed no ability to stop Omicron infection, while its booster shot did raise antibody levels enough <a href="#">to suggest that it may offer</a> protection against the Omicron variant.</p> <p>The previous variant, Delta, fueled a deadly second wave in India in the spring that devastated the country, <a href="#">overwhelming the health infrastructure</a> and leaving <a href="#">hundreds of thousands</a> dead. The government's jumbled response, with political leaders continuing to hold <a href="#">massive election rallies</a> and allow large religious gatherings as the virus spread, only worsened the disaster.</p> <p>Even as some Indian states have moved to restrict gatherings and impose measures after the detection of Omicron cases, both Mr. Modi and opposition leaders have held crowded rallies in Uttar Pradesh. The country's largest state with 200 million people, Uttar Pradesh is headed to a crucial election in the spring.</p> <p>"In many countries of the world, infections are increasing due to the new Omicron variant," Mr. Modi said during his address to the nation. "I appeal to all not to panic but remain vigilant."</p>
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<b>HEADLINE</b>	<b>12/25 States' severe snowplow driver shortage</b>
<b>SOURCE</b>	<a href="https://www.seattletimes.com/business/snowplow-driver-shortage-could-mean-slower-road-clearing/">https://www.seattletimes.com/business/snowplow-driver-shortage-could-mean-slower-road-clearing/</a>
<b>GIST</b>	<p>The nation's snow belt is facing a severe snowplow driver shortage: Montana is down half its temporary snowplow drivers this year. Kansas is missing nearly a third of all snowplow operators. Pennsylvania needs almost 60% more temporary drivers.</p> <p>"As much as states want to do a good job, they may not be able to provide the level of service they normally do," said Rick Nelson, who coordinates the American Association of State Highway and Transportation Officials' winter maintenance technical service program. "They just don't have bodies to put in plows."</p>

Many city and state transportation officials say that during the pandemic, they've been having a tough time finding workers because of a tight labor market, uncompetitive salaries, retirements and job switches. In at least one state, vaccine mandates have prompted drivers to leave.

The Washington State Department of Transportation, which normally has about 1,500 winter operations workers, is down about 177 people, both full-time and seasonal, spokesperson Barbara LaBoe said.

Higher wages in the private sector and retirements, including some prompted by a vaccine mandate, have contributed to the problem: A total of 151 winter operations staffers quit, were fired or chose retirement rather than get vaccinated. The combination of these issues could spell trouble if there is a big storm.

"Some roads may not be plowed as quickly. If we have to close a pass, it may take longer to open it," she said. "If we start working 24-hour shifts, crews get tired, and we need to protect our workers as well as the drivers on the road."

LaBoe also worries that it could take longer for state transportation workers to get to a crash to shut down lanes or divert traffic.

State and city transportation officials are competing with private industry to hire drivers with commercial licenses, who have been in high demand during the pandemic and can make a lot more money driving trucks. In October, the American Trucking Associations, a trade group, estimated that the truck driver shortage had risen to 80,000, though some have disputed that figure.

The Biden administration on Thursday announced a plan to boost the number of truckers by helping states expedite the issuance of commercial driver's licenses, increase apprenticeships and recruit military veterans.

One impediment to hiring snowplow drivers is the stress of the job. During the winter months, drivers often are on call 24 hours a day, and work 12-hour shifts under terrible weather conditions. Some states have been dealing with a pandemic-related spike in retirements of state employees who operate snowplows, officials say. Other workers have quit to take different jobs.

Most state transportation departments use permanent, full-time employees to operate snowplows. They typically are highway maintenance workers who perform other tasks the rest of the year, such as patching potholes and repairing guardrails.

Many states augment that staff by hiring seasonal temporary workers during the winter because they need to run 24-hour operations, according to Nelson. And a small number of states contract out snow removal work to local governments or private contractors.

Some state and local governments are offering incentives to attract more snowplow operators. In Colorado, the Department of Transportation bumped up its base pay for full-time employees from \$3,265 to \$3,347 a month and started giving a \$2,000 snow season performance bonus. Some cities in Massachusetts have offered \$115 to \$200 an hour to private snowplow drivers who have a commercial driver's license and own their own trucks.

Snowplow operators must have a commercial license. That means they need to pass a specialized knowledge exam and road and drug tests.

Most state snowplow operator training programs run for two to three weeks, Nelson said. Students get classroom time and then typically are put in a plow with a seasoned driver to try to get familiar with the routes for which they'll be responsible.

"Driving a snowplow is a bit more than just being a truck driver," Nelson said. "They have to control putting salt and sand down. They have to control the plow. It's very difficult to take someone with little to no experience and put them in a plow and turn them loose."

“It takes a special kind of person who wants to go out in a blizzard and plow,” Nelson said.

State and local transportation officials say they’ve been seeing a decline in applications for both permanent and seasonal jobs for several years. But during the pandemic, the situation has gotten bleaker.

In Montana, where temporary snowplow driver staffing is about 50% lower statewide than historical levels, recruitment and hiring have been increasingly difficult, said Walt Kertula, equipment bureau chief for the state Department of Transportation.

It’s a similar situation in Kansas, which is lacking 30% of snowplow operators statewide, according to Steve Hale, a spokesperson for the state Department of Transportation. Hale said the number one reason is salaries. The state agency is competing not only with the private sector but also with cities that may be paying more for similar positions.

Officials also began offering more money (albeit with no benefits) to seasonal temporary workers than what they pay people starting out as full-time equipment operators. Seasonal workers’ pay is either \$19.65 an hour or \$25 an hour.

In his more than 30 years of working in transportation in Colorado, Mike Somsen said he’s never seen it so bad when it comes to a lack of applicants to drive snowplows. In Durango, where he works as streets superintendent, five of 14 positions are unfilled.

The city is considering offering incentives such as snowplowing bonuses at the end of the year. “Holding a carrot out there isn’t working,” Somsen said. “We have to dip the carrot in icing right now.”

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HEADLINE	<b>12/25 Governors offer raises: keep state workers</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.seattletimes.com/nation-world/nation-politics/desperate-for-state-workers-governors-offer-raises-to-keep-them/">https://www.seattletimes.com/nation-world/nation-politics/desperate-for-state-workers-governors-offer-raises-to-keep-them/</a>
GIST	<p>Missouri’s social services agency is so short-staffed that child welfare workers are being assigned up to 50 cases at a time, more than double the normal caseload, said Lara Roberts, an organizer for Communications Workers of America Local 6355, a union that represents agency workers. Missourians calling with questions about food stamps or other benefits must wait on hold for up to six hours before getting answers, she said.</p> <p>Taxpayers who rely on the agency are frustrated, Roberts said — and no wonder: “If they work and pay into this, they expect to have the service.”</p> <p>Like private-sector employers, state agencies nationwide are struggling to find and keep workers amid a tight labor market and burnout because of the COVID-19 pandemic. And governors, like business owners, are proposing higher pay in a bid to recruit workers and convince them to stay, helped by federal aid and huge budget surpluses in most states.</p> <p>They include even some Republican governors, who tend to frown on spending increases and can be openly antagonistic to state workers and their unions.</p> <p>Take Missouri Gov. Mike Parson, a Republican, who has proposed paying state workers at least \$15 an hour starting next year and giving all state workers a 5.5% cost-of-living adjustment. Missouri’s minimum wage will be \$11.15 next year.</p> <p>“With many positions across state government facing turnover rates anywhere from 10-100 percent and vacancy rates from 30-100 percent, it is past time for us to make these investments in our state workforce, which remains one of the lowest paid in the nation,” Parson said in a written, online statement announcing his plan.</p>

Nationally, pay increases should help attract and retain workers who provide vital public services, from caring for people in state hospitals to clearing snow from highways and managing state prisons. But worker advocates argue that, in some cases, the proposals don't go far enough.

"Raising the floor ... is good. A 5.5% cost-of-living adjustment is good. Is it adequate? No," said Richard von Glahn, policy director for Missouri Jobs with Justice, a nonprofit that advocates for workers in the state.

And some conservative lawmakers remain wary of increasing spending on public employees.

"I hope to be able to support (Parson's plan), but it depends where the money is coming from," said Missouri state Sen. Denny Hoskins, a Republican member of the Senate Appropriations Committee. Hoskins said he'd prefer to pay for raises by eliminating vacant state agency jobs. "We have a bloated state government system," he said.

South Dakota Gov. Kristi Noem, a Republican, wants a 6% pay increase for all state workers plus additional raises for corrections officers and other hard-to-fill positions. Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis, a Republican, wants an average 4% pay increase for state workers plus additional raises for corrections and law enforcement officers. And West Virginia Republican Gov. Jim Justice has proposed 5% pay raises for state employees and public schoolteachers.

Kansas Gov. Laura Kelly, a Democrat, wants to increase base pay and offer \$3,500 bonuses to state workers at round-the-clock facilities such as state hospitals and veterans homes. Virginia Gov. Ralph Northam, a Democrat who will be replaced by Republican Glenn Youngkin next month, wants to raise teacher pay by 10% and entry-level state trooper pay by almost 8%. It will be up to Youngkin to carry out Northam's ideas.

It's not unusual for governors of either party to propose raises for state workers when the economy is doing well, said Richard Auxier, senior policy associate in the Urban-Brookings Tax Policy Center, a joint venture of two Washington, D.C., think tanks, in an email to Stateline.

Right now, states also have billions of federal COVID-19 relief dollars to spend, he noted. "What's happening now is different, in that the giant infusion of federal funds is allowing Republican governors to make large pay hikes."

States can use the federal aid to cover payroll expenses for public safety, public health, health care and human services workers.

The pay raise proposals must be approved by state legislatures. But many lawmakers of both parties are supportive.

South Dakota legislators applauded Noem last month when she proposed raises for corrections officers during her budget speech, noted Eric Ollila, executive director of the South Dakota State Employees Organization, a nonprofit that advocates for state employees.

"I've never seen our South Dakota legislature applaud giving state government employees, whatever their classification, extra funds," he said. "That was pretty amazing."

In Missouri, key GOP committee leaders have said they support Parson's proposal. And Democratic lawmakers say it's long overdue.

"I think that, very truthfully, government services are on the verge of falling apart if we don't do this," said state Rep. Peter Merideth, a Democrat and member of the House Budget Committee.

State workers have been squeezed since the Great Recession more than a decade ago, budget experts say.



States employed about 4% fewer non-education workers in early 2020 than they did in early 2008.

When the pandemic hit, the fear that COVID-19 would trigger another deep recession led state leaders to enact layoffs, furloughs and hiring freezes. School closures and shutdowns also temporarily eliminated the need for some workers, such as school bus drivers and parks and recreation staff.

Although the economy quickly rebounded, the number of state employees hasn't. There were about 273,000 fewer people working for state governments in November 2021 than in February 2020, about a 5% decrease, according to the federal Bureau of Labor Statistics. Exclude education jobs, and states employed 75,800 fewer people in November, about a 3% decrease.

Many of the hardest-to-fill state and local government jobs today have been that way for years, said Joshua Franzel, managing director of the Mission Square Research Institute, a Washington, D.C.-based nonprofit that researches public sector workforce needs. Such positions include health care, corrections, police and skilled trades jobs.

But state agency heads, union leaders and human resources experts say it's getting harder to recruit and retain workers. Like private sector workers, many public sector employees are burned out, retiring or quitting to take higher-paying jobs. Others have quit because of COVID-19 vaccination requirements imposed by some states.

About a third of state and local government workers surveyed in May by Mission Square Research Institute said working during the pandemic had made them consider changing jobs. About half said they didn't think their pay was high enough, given the risk of working during the pandemic.

Pay at Missouri's social services agency hasn't kept up with the cost of living, Roberts said. "Our state workers have only gotten an 8% [pay] increase in the past decade."

The Missouri Department of Social Services did not respond to Stateline's requests for comment by publication time.

Some state agency leaders say they can no longer compete with the pay and benefits cities offer, let alone private companies.

At the Missouri Department of Transportation, a starting maintenance worker with a commercial driver's license earns \$15.25 an hour, said Patrick McKenna, director of the agency. That worker could earn over \$18 an hour doing the same job for a Missouri city agency and over \$25 an hour at a private company, he said.

"There's so much demand for this type of work right now, and if you're not competing, you're losing," McKenna said. "Ultimately, the public loses, because the work that we do is critical to the safety and economic activities of the entire state."

The transportation department has been able to hire almost none of the 200 to 300 temporary workers it depends on to clear snow from roads in the winter, McKenna said.

Rising inflation has put additional pressure on governors to raise state employee pay. The consumer price index has jumped 6.8% over the past year, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics.

Beyond pay, state agencies could take other steps to make jobs more attractive, said Leslie Scott, director of the National Association of State Personnel Executives, a professional association for state human resources directors. For instance, they could try to give employees more flexible schedules or allow them to work from home.

Next year, most states will have big surpluses to spend. Missouri has about \$2.5 billion sitting in its general revenue fund, eight times more than average, according to the Missouri Independent.

That influx of cash must have influenced Parson's proposal, said Merideth, the state representative. "This is an unprecedented situation of money in our coffers." Parson's office declined to comment further on the governor's motivation.

Some budget experts and lawmakers caution that the long-term economic outlook is uncertain, however, and that the federal money won't last.

"I know states and local governments and counties and schools are very flush with money now," said Hoskins, the state senator. "I try to urge some caution about using this money for creating more expenses to the state, or to the local jurisdiction, instead of using it for one-time purposes. Because this money won't be around forever."

Some states have spent federal COVID-19 relief aid on bonuses for their workers. Virginia, for instance, has spent \$45 million on bonuses for staff at state behavioral health and intellectual disability facilities. But human resources experts say bonuses won't permanently solve staffing problems.

"These one-time funds are nice, and they're a tool," said Scott of the National Association of State Personnel Executives. "They're not a long-term tool."

Meanwhile, some worker advocates and agency leaders worry that the pay raises governors have proposed aren't well targeted or don't go far enough.

In Missouri, the transportation department's maintenance workers already earn more than the proposed \$15 hourly minimum. "It's a step in the right direction," McKenna said of the governor's proposal. But, he added, "we still feel we need to address the market issue itself alongside that."

The transportation department will continue to ask lawmakers for permission to use \$60 million in highway funds to raise pay for hard-to-fill jobs, McKenna said. Lawmakers have denied the agency's requested pay raises for years.

The state commission that oversees the agency sued the Parson administration this year, arguing that the agency should be able to use highway funds to raise pay without the legislature's permission.

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HEADLINE	12/26 Flight cancelations snarl holiday plans
SOURCE	<a href="https://apnews.com/article/coronavirus-pandemic-lifestyle-health-business-travel-e08ef1ae7825361486b2d3eb404d5381">https://apnews.com/article/coronavirus-pandemic-lifestyle-health-business-travel-e08ef1ae7825361486b2d3eb404d5381</a>
GIST	<p>NEW YORK (AP) — Airlines <a href="#">continued to cancel</a> hundreds of flights Saturday because of staffing issues tied to <a href="#">COVID-19</a>, <a href="#">disrupting holiday celebrations</a> during one of the busiest travel times of the year.</p> <p>FlightAware, a flight-tracking website, noted nearly 1,000 canceled flights entering, leaving or inside the U.S. Saturday, up from 690 flights scrapped on <a href="#">Friday</a>. Over 250 more flights were already canceled for Sunday. FlightAware does not say why flights are canceled.</p> <p>Delta, United and JetBlue had all said Friday that the omicron variant was causing staffing problems leading to flight cancellations. United spokesperson Maddie King said staffing shortages were still causing cancellations and it was unclear when normal operations would return. "This was unexpected," she said of omicron's impact on staffing. Delta and JetBlue did not respond to questions Saturday.</p> <p>According to FlightAware, the three airlines canceled more than 10% of their scheduled Saturday flights. American Airlines also canceled more than 90 flights Saturday, about 3% of its schedule, according to FlightAware. American spokesperson Derek Walls said the cancellations stemmed from "COVID-related</p>

sick calls.” European and Australian airlines have also canceled holiday-season flights because of staffing problems tied to COVID-19.

For travelers, that meant time away from loved ones, chaos at the airport and the stress of spending hours standing in line and on the phone trying to rebook flights. Peter Bockman, a retired actor, and his daughter Malaika, a college student, were supposed to be in Senegal on Saturday celebrating with relatives they hadn’t seen in a decade. But their 7:30 p.m. flight Friday from New York to Dakar was canceled, which they found out only when they got to the airport. They were there until 2 a.m. trying to rebook a flight.

“Nobody was organizing, trying to sort things out,” he said, faulting Delta for a lack of customer service. “Nobody explained anything. Not even, ‘Oh we’re so sorry, this is what we can do to help you.’”

Their new flight, for Monday evening, has a layover in Paris, and they are worried there will be issues with that one as well. They have already missed a big family get-together that was scheduled for Saturday.

FlightAware’s data shows airlines scrapped more than 6,000 flights globally for Friday, Saturday and Sunday combined as of Saturday evening, with almost one-third of affected flights to, from or within the United States. Chinese airlines made up many of the canceled flights, and Chinese airports topped FlightAware’s lists of those with most cancellations. It wasn’t clear why. China has strict pandemic control measures, including frequent lockdowns, and the government set one on Xi’an, a city of 13 million people, earlier this week.

Employees who answered the phone Sunday at customer hotlines for Air China and China Eastern airlines said they had received no notice of cancellations of flights to or from the United States.

Air China usually flies between New York City and Shanghai twice a week. China Eastern has two weekly flights to Los Angeles, one from Beijing and the other from the southern city of Shenzhen. Another Chinese airline, Hainan Airlines, suspended flights to the United States early in the pandemic.

The Civil Aviation Administration of China’s flight schedule through the end of March shows a total of 408 international flights planned per week. That is down 21% from a year earlier.

Flight delays and cancellations tied to staffing shortages have been a regular problem for the U.S. airline industry this year. Airlines encouraged workers to quit in 2020, when air travel collapsed, and were caught short-staffed this year as travel recovered.

To ease staffing shortages, countries including Spain and the U.K. have reduced the length of COVID-19 quarantines by letting people return to work sooner after testing positive or being exposed to the virus.

Delta CEO Ed Bastian was among those who have called on the Biden administration to take similar steps or risk further disruptions in air travel. On Thursday, the U.S. shortened COVID-19 isolation rules for health care workers only.

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HEADLINE	<b>12/25 Crew shortages cancel more WSF trips</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.seattletimes.com/seattle-news/transportation/crew-shortages-cancel-more-washington-state-ferries-trips/">https://www.seattletimes.com/seattle-news/transportation/crew-shortages-cancel-more-washington-state-ferries-trips/</a>
GIST	<p>Christmas holidays and a staffing crunch related to the coronavirus have cut Washington State Ferries service below even the lean “alternate schedules” created in October, raising questions about whether travelers will face long delays going home Sunday and Monday.</p> <p>The agency’s longstanding crew shortages were exacerbated by breakthrough cases of COVID-19, spokesperson Suanne Pelley said Saturday. There were 13 reports of ferry workers who had tested positive this week and one the week before, she said. Those typically lead to a two-week quarantine, and notices to co-workers.</p>

In addition, workers took previously scheduled Christmas weekend days off, she said. The ferry system is paying overtime and holiday wages, yet dispatchers still couldn't gather enough staff for full service, she said.

Most routes were cut to one-boat service Saturday, sticking to the minimum "alternate schedules" imposed this fall to deal with crew shortages. WSF has frequently managed to staff two boats per route in recent weeks and call those "supplemental" trips. Not on Saturday.

Drivers were already waiting two hours at the Edmonds and Kingston docks by noon and two hours at Clinton, for trips to Mukilteo. The delays abated by late afternoon.

The interisland service in the San Juans was canceled Saturday. Only two of four boats were scheduled to run between the islands and Anacortes, because of a lack of crew.

And the tiny Point Defiance-Tahlequah route was canceled. Anyone traveling between Vashon Island and Tacoma needed to use the north Vashon terminal to Fauntleroy or Southworth, then drive south. The north-Vashon "triangle" service was already running with just two boats between three terminals. A medical emergency canceled one trip from Southworth to Vashon at 4:30 p.m.

Ferry officials are hopeful they can revive that route by Sunday, and are aiming to bring back a third boat in the San Juans by Monday, said Pelley.

Coronavirus remains a problem, even though ferry workers have been required to vaccinate since Oct. 18. Retirements (and frequent quarantines) were already rocking the workforce of 1,800 people this year, before 22 mariners retired and 129 resigned in October, largely because they opposed Gov. Jay Inslee's vaccination mandate for state workers.

WSF has increased its pandemic-ravaged training classes in recent months, but long-term solutions are expected to require higher operations funding from the Legislature, as well as reforms in training, promotions, and labor contracts, along with new vessels.

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HEADLINE	<b>12/25 Daily Covid cases surpass delta surge</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.cnn.com/2021/12/25/health/us-coronavirus-saturday/index.html">https://www.cnn.com/2021/12/25/health/us-coronavirus-saturday/index.html</a>
GIST	<p>(CNN)As the highly contagious Omicron coronavirus variant continues to <a href="#">spread across the US</a> this holiday season, the rate of daily Covid-19 cases detected has eclipsed those fueled by the Delta variant over the summer.</p> <p>Covid-19 hospitalizations remain relatively lower than peaks earlier this year, yet the situation may worsen as tens of millions of Americans remain unvaccinated, putting them at <a href="#">higher risk</a> for complications and death.</p> <p>Health and government officials have been warning that the Omicron variant threatens to <a href="#">overwhelm hospitals and health care workers</a>.</p> <p>"Although hospitalizations may be less, that doesn't mean zero. There are many places in the country where hospitalizations now are increasing," Dr. William Schaffner, a professor at Vanderbilt University Medical Center, told CNN's Poppy Harlow on Friday.</p> <p>More than 69,000 Americans were hospitalized with Covid-19 on Christmas Eve, <a href="#">according to data</a> from the US Department of Health and Human Services. An increase of around 2% from last week, the figure remains below peak hospitalizations during the Delta surge and is half of the record-high from January.</p>

But experts note that hospitalization figures tend to lag with time as some illnesses worsen, and researchers are still [working to determine](#) whether Omicron is less likely to cause severe illness.

Twelve states have seen at least a 10% uptick in Covid-19 hospitalizations over the past week compared to the previous, HHS data shows. That's happening against the backdrop of a 48% increase in Covid-19 cases from last week, bringing the US average for new daily cases to 182,682, according to Johns Hopkins University.

Case numbers surpassing the summer surge is a sobering indication of Omicron's spread, as it quickly became the [most prevalent](#) variant in the US this week.

And as Covid-19 testing shortages led to [long lines](#) in many metro areas before Christmas, some pockets of the country are reporting surges.

Covid-19 cases in Los Angeles County have nearly tripled in the last week, reaching 9,998 new cases for its about 10 million residents, public health data shows. Hospitalizations, however, have remained steady.

New York state broke its own daily record of Covid-19 cases on Friday, when it reported 44,431 new cases -- a 14% increase from Thursday.

"This is not a surprise," New York Gov. Kathy Hochul said. "This is a very, very contagious variant."

Hospitalizations in the state are also rising -- but at a lower rate. Friday data showed that 4,744 New Yorkers were receiving Covid-19 treatment at hospitals, marking an uptick of 4.6% from Thursday.

#### **Preventable hospitalizations cost billions, estimate finds**

As hospitals and health officials prepare for Omicron, additional research is being performed analyzing earlier stages of the pandemic.

During the Delta surge that began over the summer, there were about 690,000 preventable Covid-19 hospitalizations in the United States that cost nearly \$14 billion dollars, [according to](#) new estimates from the Kaiser Family Foundation.

About 1.2 million hospital admissions were recorded between June and November 2021, according to data from the US Department of Health and Human Services. For their analysis, KFF used data from the CDC to estimate that 85% of those hospitalizations were among unvaccinated.

Hospitalizations for which Covid-19 was not the primary cause were excluded, as well as those that could not have been prevented by vaccines as they are not 100% effective.

Using various studies, KFF estimated the average hospitalization to cost about \$20,000 and preventable Covid-19 hospitalizations totaling \$13.8 billion dollars over the course of six months.

"The monetary cost of treating unvaccinated people for Covid-19 is borne not only by patients but also by society more broadly, including taxpayer-funded public programs and private insurance premiums paid by workers, businesses, and individual purchasers," the analysts wrote.

"Though there was of course a societal cost to develop and distribute vaccinations, the vaccines save the US health system money in the longer run by preventing costly hospitalizations."

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HEADLINE	<b>12/24 Cities cancel big New Year's Eve events</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.cnn.com/travel/article/new-years-eve-2021-celebrations-cancellations-pandemic/index.html">https://www.cnn.com/travel/article/new-years-eve-2021-celebrations-cancellations-pandemic/index.html</a>
GIST	(CNN) — For awhile there, it appeared we might be able to ring in New Year's Eve in major cities across the world with something resembling the big celebrations of yore.

Another Covid-19 surge and the rapid spread of the new Omicron variant of the coronavirus have dashed those hopes -- at least in some part of the world.

In New York City, the New Year's Eve celebration in Times Square [will be "scaled back,"](#) with fewer revelers and everyone required to wear a mask, Mayor Bill de Blasio's office said Thursday.

But some major cities in Europe, where the spread of Omicron has been startling, have already announced they're flat-out canceling plans.

Other cities around the world with traditionally iconic celebrations still plan to host their events but with safety precautions in place.

As of December 23, this what some of the world cities with traditionally huge New Year's Eve events are doing.

### **Canceled events**

The following cities (or nations) have already announced they're canceling their big shindigs:

#### **ATHENS**

**New:** No fireworks show over the Acropolis this year. Health Minister Thanos Plevris said during a news briefing on Thursday, December 23, that all public Christmas and New Year celebrations planned by municipalities are canceled.

All travelers arriving in Greece will be strongly advised to take Covid-19 tests on the second and fourth days after their arrival, on top of the existing requirement to provide a negative test result to enter Greece.

Starting at 6 a.m. Thursday, December 24, masks will become mandatory again in both indoor and outdoor spaces. For supermarkets and public transport, a double mask or a high protection mask will be required.

The measures will last until January 3, when according to Plevris, more restrictions might be put forward concerning sport and entertainment venues.

#### **BERLIN**

Germany will impose strict contact restrictions to curb the spread of Covid starting on December 28 and prohibit New Year's Eve gatherings, German Chancellor Olaf Scholz announced on Tuesday, December 21.

That means no big fireworks gathering in Berlin, the capital, nor in other big gathering spots such as Munich and Frankfurt.

From December 28, a maximum of 10 people will be allowed to meet in groups, regardless of whether they are vaccinated or recovered, Scholz said. Children 13 and younger are exempt from the new contact restrictions.

#### **EDINBURGH**

Public New Year's Eve celebrations in Scotland will be canceled, Scottish First Minister Nicola Sturgeon said on Tuesday, December 21.

[In a statement,](#) Sturgeon explained details for post-Christmas restrictions on large events to blunt the spread of Omicron.

Sturgeon said the move will "also mean unfortunately that large-scale Hogmanay celebrations -- including that planned here in our capital city -- will not proceed. I know how disappointing this will be for those looking forward to these events."



## **LONDON**

A planned New Year's Eve [event in London has been canceled](#) over Covid concerns, Mayor of London Sadiq Khan tweeted on Monday, December 20.

"Due to the surge in Covid cases, we've taken the difficult decision to cancel our NYE event in Trafalgar Square," said the tweet from Khan's verified account. "The safety of all Londoners must come first."

A statement attached to the tweet said the celebration had been expected to host 6,500 people in Trafalgar Square.

Instead, a program will be broadcast at midnight on BBC One, Khan said.

## **NEW DELHI**

The government of India's union territory of Delhi, which encompasses the national capital of New Delhi, has announced a ban on all social, cultural, political and festival gatherings until further notice because of a rise in Covid-19 cases, CNN's New Delhi Bureau reports.

All officials "shall ensure that no cultural events/gatherings/congregations take place for celebrating Christmas or New Year" in the region, according to the Delhi government's order.

Bars and restaurants will be allowed to operate at only 50% capacity.

## **PARIS**

[Paris has canceled](#) its traditional fireworks display over the Champs-Élysées Avenue to welcome the New Year because of the renewed coronavirus surge.

"The fireworks will not take place, nor unfortunately will there be any DJ sets," the mayor's office told AFP in a report on [France24.com](#).

French Prime Minister Jean Castex said on Friday, December 17, that major public parties and fireworks would be banned on New Year's Eve and recommended that even vaccinated people take a self-test before getting together for year-end parties, [according to Reuters](#).

## **ROME**

In Italy, [Rome](#) is among several cities that have decided to cancel festivities over Covid health concerns. The [Campania region](#) has also banned feasts and alcohol consumption in public areas from December 23 to January 1. Venice also canceled its open air concerts and New Year's Eve fireworks.

## **Events still scheduled**

Not all the world's cities have called off their celebrations. Here are some of the cities traditionally renowned for their exceptional fireworks and big New Year's Eve events that were still moving forward with their plans as of December 21:

## **BANGKOK**

Thailand's capital [will hold its celebrations](#), but with some safety caveats. According to the [Bangkok Post](#), only open-air venues are allowed. Attendees must be fully vaccinated, tested within 72 hours and registered to attend.

## **CAPE TOWN**

South Africa's beautiful seaside city is still allowing NYE events for its residents, [according to its tourism website](#), but with lots of safety checks in place. Those include early venue closings and strict curfews. Find more details of [South Africa's safety measures here](#).

## **DUBAI**

The pyrotechnics at the Burj Khalifa, the world's tallest building, are still planned, according to [VisitDubai.com](https://www.visitdubai.com). The emirate is requiring visitors who want to be at the celebration to register using the U by Emaar app to receive individual QR codes that will allow access.

### **LAS VEGAS**

America's gambling magnet still plans to launch fireworks from the top of eight hotel-casinos on the Strip for eight minutes, according to the [Las Vegas Review Journal](https://www.reviewjournal.com). A downtown Las Vegas fireworks show will also be held.

### **RIO DE JANEIRO**

After canceling its New Year's Eve celebrations earlier this month, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil's party capital, reversed course this week.

"We want to celebrate the end of the year in a calm, safe and organized manner. We met with the Scientific Committee, which confirmed that it would be safe to hold the city's New Year's celebrations under the provisions presented by the city government," Mayor Eduardo Paes said.

Revelers are encouraged to stay close to their homes to "avoid unnecessary travel."

### **SYDNEY**

Australia's biggest city is going ahead with plans, but you'll need tickets to attend this year, according the city of Sydney's [New Year's Eve website](https://www.newyearseve.com.au). Full vaccinations are not required but are highly encouraged.

### **TAIPEI**

The largest city on the island of Taiwan plans on holding its annual countdown show and fireworks at the towering Taipei 101 skyscraper, [according to the Taipei Times](https://www.taipeitimes.com) and other local media.

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HEADLINE	<b>12/24 Experts: avoid cloth masks; upgrade now</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.cnn.com/2021/12/24/health/cloth-mask-omicron-variant-wellness/index.html">https://www.cnn.com/2021/12/24/health/cloth-mask-omicron-variant-wellness/index.html</a>
GIST	<p>(CNN)As the highly contagious Omicron coronavirus variant continues to spread, some experts say it's past time to reconsider your face mask options -- especially if you're still wearing the cloth variety.</p> <p>"Cloth masks are little more than facial decorations. There's no place for them in light of Omicron," said CNN Medical Analyst Dr. Leana Wen, an emergency physician and visiting professor of health policy and management at the George Washington University Milken Institute School of Public Health, on CNN Newsroom Tuesday.</p> <p>"This is what scientists and public health officials have been saying for months, many months, in fact," Wen added in a separate phone interview.</p> <p>"We need to be wearing at least a three-ply surgical mask," she said, which is also known as a disposable mask and can be found at most drugstores and some grocery and retail stores. "You can wear a cloth mask on top of that, but do not just wear a cloth mask alone."</p> <p>Ideally, in crowded places, "you should be wearing a KN95 or N95 mask," which can be as inexpensive as a few dollars each, Wen added. By having a better fit and certain materials -- such as polypropylene fibers -- acting as both mechanical and electrostatic barriers, these masks better prevent tiny particles from getting into your nose or mouth and must be fitted to your face to function properly.</p> <p><b>Changing guidance</b></p> <p>During the first several months of the pandemic, health experts discouraged the general public from buying N95 masks, since medical professionals were facing a shortage of personal protection equipment. But it has "been many months since supply of N95s (has been) an issue," Wen said.</p>

Yet the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's most recent guidance on selecting, properly wearing, cleaning and storing face masks recommended people avoid N95 masks and instead choose masks with two or more layers of washable, breathable fabric -- which Wen called "a major mistake."

"If we're going to go as far as to say that masks are required -- when we don't come from a mask-wearing culture and people don't like wearing masks -- at least recommend that they wear the most effective mask," Wen said.

Other countries, [including Germany](#) and [Austria](#), have "switched their standard to say that a face covering in public must be at least a medical-grade surgical mask" in certain settings, she added.

CNN reached out to the CDC about its recommendations regarding N95s and cloth masks and is still awaiting comment.

Another factor driving change in mask recommendations is a better understanding of Covid-19 and how it spreads, said Erin Bromage, an associate professor of biology at the University of Massachusetts Dartmouth. "It's taken longer for people to appreciate the nature of airborne infection -- that this isn't necessarily a hybrid infection, say with influenza, where it can both be spread by droplets, inhaled a little bit, on surfaces and infect that way," he said. "It appears ... the primary driver of (coronavirus) infection is shared air."

Cloth masks -- encouraged earlier in the pandemic -- can filter large droplets, while more effective masks, such as N95s, can filter both large droplets and the smaller aerosols or particles potentially laden with airborne virus if infected people are present, Bromage said. A cloth face covering also has 75% inward and outward leakage, which the [American Conference of Governmental Industrial Hygienists](#) defines as the "percentage of particles entering the facepiece" and the "percentage of particles exhaled by a source exiting the facepiece," respectively.

Properly fitted N95 respirators that are approved by the US National Institute for Occupational Safety & Health can filter up to 95% of particles in the air, according to [the CDC](#). Surgical or disposable masks are around 5% to 10% less effective than N95 respirators, Bromage said, depending on their [ASTM International categorization](#) -- with types 1, 2 and 3 ranking just surgical masks from least to most effective.

Why the Omicron variant has been so successful at quickly infecting many people is "unknown at the moment," but it only underscores the role quality masks can play, Bromage said.

"If it is less virus needed, or if it is a person who's infected is putting more virus out, then the role of a mask in this is if we can cut down the amount that you're actually breathing in, you get more time," he added. "If you needed 1,000 viral particles to infect you and you're wearing something that cuts 50% of things down, it's now going to take twice as long to get to that 1,000. If you're wearing one that is a 90% efficient, it's going to take at least 10 times as long before you get infected when you're around somebody (who is infected)."

"We need to be promoting better high-quality masks everywhere, because right now a single-layer cloth mask just isn't cutting it against Omicron," said former US Surgeon General Dr. Jerome Adams Thursday on [CNN's AC360](#). "We need more testing. We need better masking. That's how we get through this."

### **Swapping out your cloth masks**

The National Institute for Occupational Health & Safety has a [list of approved N95 respirators](#), which can be found at some home improvement stores, retailers and drugstores. These masks should have a cup, flat fold or duck bill shape; two straps that go around your head; an adjustable wire nose bridge; and appropriate markings indicating NIOSH approval, the [CDC says](#).

The agency also has resources for determining [whether an N95 respirator is counterfeit](#), and for properly putting it on, taking it off and [performing a respirator seal check](#).

The difference between N95 and KN95 respirators is where the mask is certified, according to [Oklahoma's state health department](#). The US certifies N95s, while China approves KN95s. About 60% of KN95 respirators in the US are counterfeit and don't meet NIOSH requirements, the [CDC says](#). The CDC has a [list of signs](#) a KN95 respirator hasn't been approved by NIOSH.

"If they're made to the standard and certified by the appropriate boards in their country like NIOSH here, they all do basically the same thing," Bromage said. "But there is a ton of knockoffs that are not certified in the KN95 side of things, that may meet the standards but they're not certified to meet it. And there's others that clearly don't."

These experts' recommendation to wear better masks isn't a suggestion to trash your cloth masks or go "maskless" when you don't have a medical-grade mask available.

In studies of various face masks, cloth masks with multiple layers and higher thread counts "have demonstrated superior performance compared to single layers of cloth with lower thread counts," but are still less effective than medical-grade masks, according to the CDC. Wearing a cloth mask over a medical procedure mask, as Wen suggested, can better protect you and others by improving fit and therefore filtration capacity, the CDC says.

"If all you have is a cloth mask, it's still better than nothing," Wen said. "But you are not well-protected, and you should know that you're not well-protected. And so if you're going to a crowded indoor setting and all you have is a cloth mask, don't go."

If you're unable to buy medical-grade masks for whatever reason, go to locations that are requiring masks and providing them for free -- such as some train stations, grocery stores or businesses -- and ask for a surgical mask, Wen suggested.

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HEADLINE	<b>12/25 Mali: no presence Russian mercenaries</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.reuters.com/world/mali-denies-deployment-russian-mercenaries-says-only-trainers-present-2021-12-25/">https://www.reuters.com/world/mali-denies-deployment-russian-mercenaries-says-only-trainers-present-2021-12-25/</a>
GIST	<p>BAMAKO, Dec 25 (Reuters) - Mali's government has denied the presence of Russian mercenaries in the West African country after 15 Western powers accused Russia of providing material support to a deployment of private military contractors.</p> <p>France, Canada and 13 European nations on Thursday condemned Moscow for facilitating an alleged deployment of private military contractors from the Russia-backed Wagner Group to Mali, where the government is battling an Islamist insurgency.</p> <p>Government spokesman Abdoulaye Maiga in a statement late on Friday denied that "elements of a private security company" had been deployed to Mali. He said "Russian trainers" were present as part of a bilateral agreement between Mali and Russia.</p> <p>"[Mali] formally denies these baseless allegations and demands that evidence be brought by independent sources," Maiga said. "Russian trainers are in Mali as part of the reinforcement of the operational capacities of the National Defence and Security Forces."</p> <p>It was not immediately clear who the Russian trainers were, nor their exact role. The Ministry of Territorial Administration and Decentralisation could not immediately be reached for clarification early on Saturday.</p> <p>Earlier this month the European Union suspended its training mission for soldiers in Central African Republic (CAR) because of fears it could get tied up in violations of international law by Russian mercenaries, including the Wagner Group.</p>

	<p>The United States, which sanctioned Wagner for its actions in CAR earlier this year, has repeatedly condemned any potential deployment of Russian mercenaries to Mali.</p> <p>The U.S. State Department has said that such a deployment would cost the Malian government upwards of \$10 million per month and further destabilise the country as it struggles to ward off Islamist insurgents.</p> <p>Russian President Vladimir Putin has said the Wagner Group do not represent the Russian state, but that private military contractors have the right to work anywhere in the world so long as they do not break Russian law.</p>
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HEADLINE	<b>12/24 Covid: Africa poverty, hunger worsens</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://apnews.com/article/coronavirus-pandemic-business-health-poverty-africa-a27692e54c861280b22abe5725d5489f">https://apnews.com/article/coronavirus-pandemic-business-health-poverty-africa-a27692e54c861280b22abe5725d5489f</a>
GIST	<p>HARARE, Zimbabwe (AP) — Outside a foreign currency exchange in Zimbabwe’s capital, hordes of people desperate for U.S. dollars are pushed up against each other.</p> <p>“That’s it, keep it tight,” some shout, trying to prevent others from jumping the line to buy the money that could get them a discount on goods pegged to a quickly devaluing local currency.</p> <p>Nearly two years into a global pandemic, a new spike in coronavirus cases driven by the omicron variant is once again shuttering businesses, halting travel, reviving fears of overwhelmed hospitals and upending travel and holiday plans in countries around the world.</p> <p>But in Zimbabwe and other African nations, the virus’s resurgence is threatening the very survival of millions of people who have already been driven to the edge by a pandemic that has devastated their economies. When putting food on the table is not a given, worries about whether to gather with family members for the holiday or heed public announcements urging COVID-19 precautions take a back seat.</p> <p>“Yes, I have heard of the new variant, but it can never be worse than having nothing to eat at home right now,” says furniture store clerk Joshua Nyoni, one of the dozens waiting outside the exchange. Like many others in the chaotic crowd, Nyoni alternately wears his face mask below his chin or puts it in his pocket.</p> <p>The United Nations Economic Commission on Africa, or ECA, noted in March that about 9 in 10 of the world’s extremely poor people live in Africa. The ECA now warns that the economic effects already felt since the pandemic began in 2020 “will push an additional 5 to 29 million below the extreme poverty line.”</p> <p>“If the impact of the pandemic is not limited by 2021, an additional 59 million people could suffer the same fate, which would bring the total number of extremely poor Africans to 514 million people,” the agency says.</p> <p>The World Bank estimates the economy went from 2.4% growth in 2019 to a 3.3% contraction in 2020, plunging Africa into its first recession in 25 years.</p> <p>“The economic disruption wrought by COVID-19 has pushed hunger crises off a cliff,” Sean Granville-Ross, Africa regional director for the nonprofit charitable organization Mercy Corps, told The Associated Press.</p> <p>Granville-Ross says his organization in 2021 saw “an alarming spike in need” in regions such as the Sahel, West Africa, East Africa and southern Africa where some countries were already experiencing humanitarian crises and conflict before COVID-19.</p> <p>Worry is now intensifying amid a spike in COVID infections in Africa, which currently accounts for about 9 million of the world’s roughly 275 million cases.</p>

The World Health Organization has for months described Africa as “one of the least affected regions in the world” in its weekly pandemic reports. But in mid-December it said the number of new cases was “currently doubling every five days, the fastest rate this year” as the delta and omicron variants push up infections. Both South Africa and Zimbabwe have been reporting reduced numbers over the past week, but authorities remain cautious.

Renewed travel restrictions and possible lockdowns “will only push millions more people to poverty and undermine the slight economic recovery we have started to see,” Granville-Ross says.

Compared to the continent as a whole, where just over 7% of the population has received two shots of the coronavirus vaccine, Zimbabwe is regarded as a success story — even though only about 20% of its 15 million people have been fully vaccinated.

Amid lingering hesitancy, the government has threatened to widen vaccine mandates. But for many people, virus infection fears have taken a back seat to the more urgent task of finding enough money to feed their families.

Dozens of residents desperate for access to money in an economy where cash, especially the U.S. dollar, is king, sleep outside both foreign currency exchanges and banks, huddled closely together for days. Elderly people, many without face masks or not properly wearing them, stand in tightly packed lines that snake for kilometers, waiting to withdraw their pensions.

“I would rather spend my time here than queue for the vaccine,” says Nyoni, outside the crowded foreign currency exchange.

“If I catch the virus, they may quarantine me, treat me or even feed me if I am hospitalized,” he says. “But hunger is different: You can’t be put in quarantine because the family has nothing to eat. People just watch you die.”

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HEADLINE	<b>12/25 Omicron surge: another subdued Christmas</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://apnews.com/article/coronavirus-pandemic-lifestyle-health-religion-new-zealand-9ec85a6390d13e3144bdaa236b988666">https://apnews.com/article/coronavirus-pandemic-lifestyle-health-religion-new-zealand-9ec85a6390d13e3144bdaa236b988666</a>
GIST	<p>ROME (AP) — Christians around the world celebrated their second COVID-19 Christmas as surging infections in many countries overwhelmed hospitals, canceled flights and curbed religious observances Saturday, a point in the pandemic when coronavirus vaccines were more available than ever.</p> <p>While some countries in Asia imposed restrictions to try to contain the highly contagious omicron variant, governments in Europe and elsewhere preached common sense despite reporting record daily cases this week, advising their citizens to use masks and voluntarily limit the size of holiday gatherings.</p> <p>The head of intensive care at a hospital in Marseille, France, said most of the COVID-19 patients are unvaccinated, while his staff members are exhausted or can’t work because they are infected.</p> <p>“We’re sick of this,” Dr. Julien Carvelli, the ICU chief at Marseille’s La Timone Hospital, as his team spent another Christmas Eve tending to COVID-19 patients on breathing machines. “We’re afraid we won’t have enough space.”</p> <p>Thousands of people across England got a vaccine booster shot for Christmas as new cases in Britain hit another daily record of 122,186. Dr. Emily Lawson, the head of the National Health Service’s vaccination program, thanked volunteers for being on hand for the holiday.</p>



Pope Francis used his Christmas address to pray for some of those vaccines to reach the poorest countries. While wealthy countries have inoculated as much as 90% of their adult populations, 8.9% of Africa's people are fully jabbed, making it the world's least-vaccinated continent,

"Grant health to the infirm and inspire all men and women of good will to seek the best ways possible to overcome the current health crisis and its effects," Francis said from the loggia of St. Peter's Basilica. "Open hearts to ensure that necessary medical care – and vaccines in particular – are provided to those peoples who need them most."

Only a few thousand well-wishers turned out for his noontime address and blessing, but even that was better than last year, when Italy's Christmas lockdown forced Francis indoors for the annual "Urbi et Orbi" (To the city and the world) speech.

At a reception center for asylum-seekers on the Mediterranean island nation of Cyprus, Patricia Etoh, a Catholic from Cameroon, said she did not have any special plans because it just did not feel like Christmas without her 6-year-old child, who she had to leave behind.

But she added: "We're grateful, we're alive, and when we're alive, there's hope."

On the other side of the globe, hundreds of thousands of people in the Philippines, Asia's largest Roman Catholic nation, spent Christmas without homes, electricity, or adequate food and water after a powerful typhoon left at least 375 people dead last week and devastated mostly central island provinces.

Gov. Arthur Yap of hard-hit Bohol province, where more than 100 people died in the typhoon and about 150,000 houses were damaged or destroyed, asked foreign aid agencies to help provide temporary shelters and water-filtration systems to supplement Philippine government aid.

"There is overwhelming fear. There are no gifts, there were no Christmas Eve dinners. There is none of that today," Yap told The Associated Press.

Yap said he was happy that many Filipinos could celebrate Christmas more safely after COVID-19 cases dropped, but he pleaded: "Please don't forget us."

In South Korea, social distancing rules required churches to limit worshippers to 70% of seating capacity, and service attendees had to be fully vaccinated.

South Korea has been grappling with soaring infections and deaths since it significantly eased its virus curbs in early November as part of efforts to return to pre-pandemic normalcy. The country was eventually forced to restore its toughest distancing guidelines, including a four-person limit on social gatherings and a 9 p.m. curfew for restaurants and cafes.

Australia also had a Christmas with a surge of COVID-19 cases, its worst of the pandemic, which forced states to reinstate mask mandates and other measures.

Christmas celebrations were subdued in much of India, with more decorations than crowds: Authorities reintroduced nighttime curfews and restrictions on gatherings of more than five people in big cities like New Delhi and Mumbai. People attended midnight Mass in Mumbai and elsewhere, but in smaller numbers.

Adding to the customary stress of holiday travel, airlines around the world canceled hundreds of flights as the omicron variant jumbled schedules and reduced staffing levels.

According to FlightAware, more than 3,900 flights scheduled for Friday and Saturday were canceled, with close to half of them involving Chinese airlines. About 30% of affected flights — more than 1,100 — were to, from or within the United States.

	<p>The cancellations still represented a small fraction of global flights. FlightAware says it tracked more than 100,000 arrivals in 24 hours.</p> <p>As the pandemic spread around the world the past two years, New Zealand used its isolation to its advantage. Border controls kept the worst of the virus at bay. By this Christmas, New Zealand had recorded 50 deaths in a population of 5.5 million.</p> <p>New Zealanders enjoyed the holiday in the warmth of mid-summer with few restrictions. Their country has one of the world's most vaccinated populations, with 95% of adults having had at least one dose. The country also is one of the few largely untouched by omicron.</p> <p>But that success has come at a cost. There were empty chairs at some family tables this holiday season because some New Zealanders living and working overseas were not able to return home due to isolation and quarantine requirements.</p> <p>On Fiji, many in the deeply religious nation will celebrate Christmas at traditional church services and family gatherings. The Pacific island has an ongoing outbreak and a pandemic death toll of almost 700, but 92% of the adult population is fully vaccinated.</p> <p>Health Secretary James Fong, in a Christmas message, urged Fijians to "please celebrate wisely."</p> <p>In remote Macuata province, residents of four villages received a special Christmas gift: Electricity was connected to their villages for the first time.</p>
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HEADLINE	<b>12/24 Rent a car? Higher prices, wait, few choices</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.wsj.com/articles/looking-to-rent-a-car-expect-higher-prices-long-waits-and-slim-pickings-11640341983?mod=hp_lista_pos2">https://www.wsj.com/articles/looking-to-rent-a-car-expect-higher-prices-long-waits-and-slim-pickings-11640341983?mod=hp_lista_pos2</a>
GIST	<p>Travelers looking to rent cars are encountering higher rates and few choices, if they can find a car at all.</p> <p>The <a href="#">shortage of rental cars</a> that emerged earlier this year has gotten worse as companies such as <a href="#">Hertz Global Holdings</a> Inc. struggle to restock their fleets after selling off big chunks early in the pandemic, analysts and executives say. Leisure travel has also bounced back with more Americans vaccinated and booking trips, they say, further taxing already limited availability.</p> <p>Some customers who can find cars are <a href="#">making compromises</a>, like going down a size or otherwise booking a vehicle that doesn't quite fit their needs.</p> <p>The average daily rental rate in the U.S. in December—already one of the most expensive times of the year to rent a car—was \$81, up 31% from a year ago, according to travel company Kayak. Before the pandemic, the average rental rate was closer to \$46 a day in December, Kayak said.</p> <p>In some cities, particularly those in warm climates and destinations for winter sports, rates have risen even higher. In Maui, Salt Lake City and Bozeman, Mont.—among the most costly spots right now to rent a car—the average daily rate was above \$100 for this holiday season, Kayak found.</p> <p>The spread of <a href="#">the new Omicron variant</a> has further complicated the picture for travelers, prompting some to ditch air travel plans and rent a car instead.</p> <p>"It was overall a high-stress situation," said Rebecca Girimonte, who recently decided to drive to North Carolina from Chicago, rather than fly to the New York area for the holidays.</p> <p>In scrambling to find a rental car, she was taken aback by the prices and lack of options. When she arrived at Enterprise's rental counter, there were only two cars: a Dodge muscle car and a Chevy Spark subcompact. The rate for her nine-day trip was around \$725—roughly \$25 a day more expensive than if</p>

she had been booking a year ago based on the national average. She chose the Spark, but had to stuff her 5' 11" boyfriend in the tiny back seat with luggage.

"I couldn't think too much about budget or anything like that because if we didn't get it all figured out in a matter of hours, we were going to be out of luck," Ms. Girimonte said.

Rental-car executives say there is little relief in sight as a computer-chip shortage continues to constrain [new-vehicle supplies](#). To secure more vehicles, some companies have turned to buying used vehicles from auctions and from dealer lots, according to analysts and executives.

The rising rates are helping to lift earnings across the rental-car sector, resulting in strong profits. For instance, [Avis Budget Group](#) Inc. [CAR 3.24%](#) said in November its adjusted operating [profit exceeded \\$1 billion](#) for the first time, in large part because of higher rental-car prices.

"The Americas booking patterns for the fourth quarter and holiday seasons appear robust and are currently outpacing 2019 levels," Chief Executive Joseph Ferraro said on Avis's third-quarter earnings call.

Hertz and Enterprise Holdings Inc. said they understand renting a car is a challenge right now and are taking steps to alleviate constraints, such as moving staff and vehicles to high-demand locations and procuring cars and trucks through nontraditional channels, like buying from dealerships instead of directly from manufacturers.

Both companies urged travelers to book as early as possible for better options and more affordable rates. An Avis spokesperson declined to comment.

Early in the pandemic, many rental-car firms sold off big parts of their fleet, responding to a big [drop off in bookings](#). However, [demand returned](#) faster than expected and at a time when car companies were already straining to catch up on factory production.

Hertz said it had about 390,000 vehicles in its fleet in the third quarter, about 130,000 fewer than it did at the end of 2019, before the pandemic hit the U.S. in force.

Rental-fleet utilization rates have risen in recent months. Avis reported that its average fleet utilization—an indication of how much its vehicles are in operation versus sitting on the lot—hit 71% through September, compared with 50% for the first nine months of last year.

The outlook on [new-vehicle availability](#) remains uncertain. Auto executives say inventory levels should improve as factory output normalizes, but many companies are also looking to permanently reduce the number of vehicles they manufacture—a move that could affect how much rental-car providers pay for vehicles, analysts say.

"The car-rental situation will only get better if the car-manufacturing landscape improves," said Henry Hartevelde, a travel industry analyst for San Francisco-based Atmosphere Research Group. "Until then, it's going to be one of the bleakest times to be renting a car."

Many travelers are already experiencing longer waits at airport counters, and in some cases, have had reservations canceled because of a lack of vehicles, industry analysts and travel advisers say.

Cassie Clark, a 24-year-old New Yorker, said she couldn't find a rental car to travel to her parents' home in Rochester, N.Y., for Christmas. Because she was traveling with her dog, she ruled out taking a train or air travel.

Ms. Clark scoured websites and locations all over the city looking for an affordable rental car, to be met with "Sold Out" notifications or rates of around \$350 a day, far outside her budget. In the end, Ms. Clark gave up and decided to stay home in East Harlem for the holidays.

	"I'm not going to see my family for Christmas at all, all because of the rental car situation," she said.
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HEADLINE	<b>12/25 Omicron complicates crew changes in ports</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.wsj.com/articles/omicron-surge-complicates-crew-changes-in-busy-cargo-ports-11640428202?mod=hp_list_pos1">https://www.wsj.com/articles/omicron-surge-complicates-crew-changes-in-busy-cargo-ports-11640428202?mod=hp_list_pos1</a>
GIST	<p>Tens of thousands of <a href="#">seafarers are stuck at sea</a> working beyond their maximum 11-month contracts, as the emergence of <a href="#">the Omicron Covid-19 variant</a> hinders cargo ship operators' ability to change over crews.</p> <p>With the world's 1.5 million sailors spending long stretches far from land, only about a quarter of them are fully vaccinated, ship operators, crewing agencies and industry trade bodies estimate.</p> <p>The low rate of immunization is <a href="#">constraining the movement of crews</a> as countries enforce new travel restrictions for people who haven't gotten their shots.</p> <p>Many ports in Asia require seafarers to wait seven to 10 days before disembarking to ensure they aren't infected. Meanwhile, sailors traveling to port cities to start contracts are getting blocked at border crossings that require proof of full vaccination.</p> <p>"Every time there is mutation, borders shut down. Governments stop people from moving, but they want cargo to move normally," said Rajesh Unni, chief executive of Synergy Group, a Singapore-based ship-management and crewing company that runs more than 500 ships. "We had 56 countries tightening travel restrictions with Omicron and some sailors flying out from South Africa were diverted back and quarantined in hotels."</p> <p>Crew changes routinely take place in big gateway ports in China, Singapore, Los Angeles, Houston, the Netherlands and Belgium, with more than 150,000 seafarers flying around the globe each month <a href="#">to connect with ships and replace colleagues</a> who have been at sea.</p> <p>Governments have been trying to balance efforts to curb the spread of Covid-19 against the need to keep products moving world-wide amid widespread supply-chain disruptions.</p> <p>Several seafaring countries including the U.S., Indonesia and Greece have said they would recognize sailors as essential workers, but the difficulty of coordinating cross-border efforts has slowed progress, according to a senior Greek government official. Among the hurdles, the official said, is that many ports, airports and other entry points haven't been clearly instructed to assign priority to sailors, and the sailors haven't been given proper documentation for priority border checks and boardings.</p> <p>The International Maritime Organization, the United Nations body that regulates global shipping, has repeatedly said <a href="#">the inability to rotate crews</a> has emerged as the biggest challenge facing maritime operators. It has called on governments to recognize seafarers as essential workers for global supply chains and exempt them from travel barriers.</p> <p>"They are still deemed not essential personnel, but without those workers you would get no food, medicine and other essentials," said Jan Dieleman, president of Cargill Ocean Transportation, which that operates more than 700 ships and is a unit of American commodities giant Cargill Inc. "Sailors can't travel or get priority for vaccines. It's super complicated."</p> <p>The peak for stranded seafarers on ships came in late 2020 when nearly 400,000 had to work for months beyond their contracts, according to the International Chamber of Shipping, an industry trade body. The ICS, along with ship operators and crew managers, pegged the current number of stranded sailors at about 200,000.</p> <p>ICS general secretary Guy Platten said the Omicron variant prompted governments to impose new restrictions on travel to the Philippines from Belgium and the Netherlands, and that the movement of</p>

goods is slower between France and the U.K. after [Paris banned most travel](#) for people coming in from England.

“Blanket regulations disrupt supply chains and transportation workers should have the right to go through,” Mr. Platten said.

Port authorities and nonprofits at ports such as Los Angeles, Long Beach, Rotterdam and Singapore [now offer free vaccinations to sailors](#).

Protocols adopted by the International Maritime Organization call for crew members with Covid-19 symptoms to be isolated in cabins, with food and other supplies left outside the rooms by colleagues in surgical robes and masks. If an infected sailor deteriorates, the captain must find a port to let them out for treatment.

“We’ve had a number of countries refusing to take in sick sailors,” Mr. Unni said. “And once one crew member gets infected, chances are others will. The virus is not going away and we haven’t managed to get through political corridors and tell decision makers that this needs to be fixed.”

Some mariners who were able to disembark after completing voyages are having trouble getting home. Adolpho Soledad, a mechanic, was supposed to be home in the Philippines this week to celebrate Christmas with his wife and four young children. He is instead in a hotel in South Africa.

Mr. Soledad is among thousands of travelers who had their flights canceled when the Omicron variant was discovered in the country in November. Having spent the past eight months traveling on a bulk carrier between Africa and China, he has yet to be vaccinated and has no idea when he will be allowed to travel.

“I managed to stay healthy and was really looking forward to getting back home to my family,” he said. “Now I’m stuck alone and every time I call home my younger daughter is in tears, begging me to come back. It breaks my heart.”

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HEADLINE	<b>12/25 Latin America: world leader in vaccinations</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.wsj.com/articles/latin-america-is-now-a-world-leader-in-vaccinations-11640428207?mod=hp_lead_pos3">https://www.wsj.com/articles/latin-america-is-now-a-world-leader-in-vaccinations-11640428207?mod=hp_lead_pos3</a>
GIST	<p>SAN SALVADOR, El Salvador—Latin America, once a hot spot of Covid-19 deaths, now leads the U.S. and much of the world in vaccinations, as supply concerns have eased and health policy makers rush to shield their countries from new variants roiling other regions.</p> <p>Applying a mix of Chinese, European and American vaccines, about 62% of South America’s population has received two shots or the single dose by Johnson &amp; Johnson. That is more than the 60% of Europeans inoculated with two doses, the 56% of people in North America and the 54% in Asia, according to Our World in Data, a pandemic research project at the University of Oxford. Only Australia has fully vaccinated a bigger percentage of its people.</p> <p>Thanks in part to the successes from past inoculation campaigns, like the fight against yellow fever, citizens across Latin America generally embrace vaccines.</p> <p>The spread of the Omicron variant in Europe and the U.S. means it may still be early to celebrate in the region, where the latest coronavirus strain is starting to spread just as families plan holiday gatherings. And not all countries have vaccinated effectively—Guatemala, for instance, has only managed to deliver a first dose to a third of its people. Mexico lags behind other Latin American countries and all but two continents in fully vaccinating its people.</p> <p>Still, the vaccination drive across most countries underscores a dramatic turnaround for Latin America, which has just 8% of the world’s population but by mid-2021 was accounting for a third of global deaths.</p>

In the last month, deaths have fallen to 8% of the world's total as the vaccination campaign has expanded in many nations, from wealthier Brazil and Chile to even some of the poorer countries, like El Salvador. Health officials say that is one reason cases haven't risen even with Omicron's arrival.

Nearly two-thirds of El Salvador's 6.5 million people have received two doses, second in Central America only to more affluent Costa Rica. Healthcare workers attribute the progress to an aggressive effort by government officials to procure shots through Chinese manufacturers, as well as from the companies producing the Pfizer and AstraZeneca vaccines.

Health officials here have had to contend with the challenge of gangs, which the International Crisis Group says are present in 94% of municipalities. Local health organizations and civil society groups say the government of President Nayib Bukele has had to carefully navigate gang-controlled areas to implement pandemic-control policies.

Wide vaccine penetration permitted El Salvador earlier this year to donate more than 30,000 vaccines to neighboring Honduras. And this month, Mr. Bukele said his country would opt out of the Covax mechanism, which provides vaccines to poor nations.

"We cede our place to other countries," he said via his Twitter account. "Thank God we have more than enough, and there are other countries that need them."

The vaccine drive comes amid criticism from medical groups that say the Bukele government has underreported deaths from the pandemic. A spokesman for Mr. Bukele didn't respond to calls and text messages seeking comment.

But even some critics of the government's response, like Dr. Iván Solano, an infectious disease and immunization specialist, give the administration credit when it comes to vaccinations.

"In terms of getting vaccines out there for the population, I think we've had pretty good management," said Dr. Solano.

Across the region, health authorities say wider availability of vaccines has helped governments loosen restrictions on mobility and businesses as countries recover from a punishing economic downturn triggered by the pandemic. Brazil, which logged 618,000 deaths—the second-highest in the pandemic after the U.S.—has now largely gotten back to normal.

"The leap in vaccination rates is what took Brazil out of the center of the storm," said Carlos Fortaleza, an epidemiologist at São Paulo State University.

Brazilian health experts said that among their biggest challenges was countering President Jair Bolsonaro, who characterized the illness as nothing more than "a little flu."

Now, nearly 80% of Brazil's population has received at least one dose, 66% have gotten two doses and more than 10% have accessed a booster shot, according to Our World in Data.

In Colombia, a country of 50 million where more than half the population has received two doses of the vaccine, health authorities expressed relief as deaths and transmission rates dropped sharply. Colombia has also been vaccinating children as young as 3, one of the few countries in the world to do so. The Andean nation is logging on average some 2,000 new cases a day, compared with 30,000 in June. Deaths dropped from nearly 700 daily that month to 50 a day in recent days.

Still, authorities say they are ramping up a public campaign to encourage citizens to get fully vaccinated and get booster shots amid concerns about a potential uptick in cases because of the holidays and Omicron.



“These upcoming two weeks are vital for vaccination,” said Julian Fernández, director of epidemiology at the Health Ministry.

In much of Latin America, big cities have high rates of inoculation, with two-thirds having received at least one dose. More than 70% of people in Pereira in Colombia’s coffee-growing heartland have been fully inoculated.

Pereira Mayor Carlos Maya said municipal health workers did it by setting up health posts to administer shots at public-bus and cable-car stations to target commuters, as well as outside the city’s soccer stadium. The city was the first in the country to require vaccination cards for soccer fans to watch their local team, he said.

“We’ve had to change the usual strategy and go to the nontraditional places,” the mayor said. “We went out to find the people so that they get vaccinated.”

In Argentina’s capital, Buenos Aires, 83% of the city’s three million inhabitants have been fully vaccinated and 14% have received a booster. The city’s health minister, Fernán Quiros, attributed the success to Argentine society’s “affinity for vaccination campaigns.”

“They rapidly accepted receiving them,” he said.

However, while big cities in Latin America have pushed forward on the vaccination front, inoculation rates in rural areas have lagged behind. Brazil has seen 78% of people in the rich state of São Paulo fully vaccinated, but fewer than 40% in the poor Amazonian state of Roraima have gotten the two doses. Other countries face similar stark differences in vaccination rates between city and countryside.

“The challenge persists in reaching the more rural territories of the country,” said Colombia’s health minister, Fernando Ruiz.

In El Salvador, a recent poll found more than 90% of Salvadorans approved of the government’s pandemic management.

“The critics just don’t understand the negotiations and the sacrifices that you have to make in a country like this one,” said Hector Enrique Díaz, 35 years old, a truck driver who was preparing to receive his booster shot. “Whatever you can do to get people vaccinated, it’s the right way to go.”

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HEADLINE	12/25 Govts weigh mitigation vs containment
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.wsj.com/articles/governments-weigh-mitigation-versus-containment-as-they-wrestle-with-omicron-11640437456?mod=hp_lead_pos1">https://www.wsj.com/articles/governments-weigh-mitigation-versus-containment-as-they-wrestle-with-omicron-11640437456?mod=hp_lead_pos1</a>
GIST	<p>The Christmas holiday weekend began with a growing number of governments wrestling with whether to focus on containing the spread of <a href="#">the Omicron variant</a> or trying to mitigate its effects as staff outages and self-isolation requirements <a href="#">continued to disrupt travel</a> and other services across the U.S. and Europe.</p> <p>Airlines in the U.S. <a href="#">canceled more than 600 flights</a> on Friday, calling off hundreds more that were scheduled for Saturday, and there were similar disruptions across Europe, according FlightAware, a flight-tracking site, reflecting the wider disruptions caused by the quickly spreading strain of Covid-19. Some governments have begun shortening their recommended isolation periods for anyone contracting the virus to limit workforce shortages in key sectors, while the U.S. is rushing to boost testing capacity.</p> <p>New York Gov. Kathy Hochul said Friday that critical workers—including those in education, healthcare, transportation, grocery stores and sanitation—who tested positive for the virus would be allowed to return to work after five days under certain conditions. They would have to be fully vaccinated and either they don’t have symptoms or their symptoms are resolving and they haven’t had a fever for 72 hours.</p>

Those returning will need to remain masked, Ms. Hochul said. “We need you again, we need you to be able to go to work,” she said.

New York state’s move comes after England shortened its recommended self-isolation period to seven days for vaccinated people, and some airline executives wrote to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention seeking an adjustment in agency isolation guidelines to avoid disruptions to operations.

The CDC on Thursday [revised its isolation and quarantine guidelines](#) for healthcare workers, partly to help hospitals maintain enough staff to deal with any rise in admissions due to Omicron. Healthcare workers can go back to work within seven days following a negative test, or potentially even sooner in a staffing crunch. Also, healthcare workers who are fully vaccinated and who got a booster wouldn’t need to isolate after high-risk exposure to the virus.

In the U.S., the 7-day average of Covid-19 cases has eclipsed the peak during Delta’s march through the country. The average reached 182,682 as of Dec. 23, according to a Wall Street Journal analysis of Johns Hopkins University data; the last time the figure was higher was Jan. 21.

In South Africa, where Omicron was first identified, people who don’t have any Covid symptoms won’t have to isolate or take a test if they have been in contact with positive case, the government said Friday. The progress of the new variant in the country has been closely watched after it was first identified last month. Studies there, along with similar studies in Scotland and the U.K., have pointed to a substantially lower risk of hospitalization with Omicron compared with earlier variants such as Delta.

South Africa’s health ministry now advises that asymptomatic people who have been in contact with those who had tested positive don’t need to isolate but should instead monitor possible symptoms for up to a week and avoid attending large gatherings. Only people developing symptoms should get tested, and isolate for eight to 10 days.

Other requirements, such as wearing face coverings, remain in place.

Elsewhere, governments are considering tightening restrictions. French authorities will convene a special meeting to assess the progress of the pandemic on Monday, which could lead to further curbs on travel, after France recorded another daily record of nearly 100,000 new infections Friday, 20% of which were attributed to the Omicron variant. Italy also reported another daily record of more than 50,000 new infections, though like elsewhere, the increase in hospitalizations remains modest in comparison.

The U.K. also reported a new daily record of infections on Friday, this time passing 120,000. London is among the worst-affected areas. The U.K.’s Office for National Statistics estimates that one in 20 Londoners had Covid-19 on Dec. 16, with that figure rising to one in 10 last Sunday. Critical services are beginning to feel the weight of enforced staff absences due to isolation requirements or illness.

While Prime Minister [Boris Johnson](#)’s government has reduced the required isolation period to ease the strain and get people back to work more quickly, he hasn’t yet ruled out the prospect of further social-distancing measures in the coming days. Such steps have already been announced in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. [Many citizens opted to stay home regardless](#), worried of testing positive and having to cancel holiday plans.

The head of the U.K.’s Health Security Agency on Friday said future decisions would likely be based on social needs in addition to the severity of the illness caused by Omicron.

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HEADLINE	12/24 Blacks still face higher jobless rate
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.theguardian.com/business/2021/dec/24/black-americans-jobless-rate-job-market">https://www.theguardian.com/business/2021/dec/24/black-americans-jobless-rate-job-market</a>

GIST	<p>Even as economists celebrated a job market recovery seen from the beginning of the pandemic, when unemployment peaked at 14.8%, to November when unemployment was 4.2%, Black Americans have continued to see a much higher jobless rate.</p> <p>In November, Black Americans had an unemployment rate of 6.7%, while the unemployment rate for white Americans was 3.5%. The gap is even more pronounced between men: Black men had an unemployment rate of 7.3% in November while white men saw an unemployment rate of 3.4%.</p> <p>That this disparity has continued over the course of the pandemic is unsurprising to economists who have long paid attention to the racial gap in unemployment numbers.</p> <p>Valerie Wilson, director of the Economic Policy Institute’s Program on Race, Ethnicity and the Economy, said that occupational segregation has meant that Black Americans were less likely to be able to work remotely amid lockdown orders. Many Black workers were given the choice of keeping jobs where they faced greater risks or deciding that the risk was not worth it.</p> <p>“The two-to-one [disparity] has still been pretty consistent, and I think that says a lot to just how deeply entrenched those labor market inequalities are,” Willson said.</p> <p>Black Americans have long faced discrimination in hiring processes. One study from 2017 showed that Black Americans who remove references to their race on their resumes are twice more likely to get interviews. The unemployment rate is even consistent across educational levels, with the unemployment rates of Black Americans who have a high school or bachelor’s degree being twice that of White Americans who hold the same degree.</p> <p>Though many companies promised to reevaluate their hiring processes and focus on diverse recruitment following the massive protests after the murder of George Floyd in summer 2020, the racial gap in the unemployment rate still managed to stick. Other figures show that little progress has been made: There are just five Black CEOs leading Fortune 500 companies, and Black full-time workers are still making more than 20% less than white full-time workers.</p> <p>Even the gains that Black Americans have seen in employment numbers come with caveats. In November, the unemployment rate for Black women jumped 2%, from 7% to 5% – the largest decrease for any group. While the number reflects Black women starting jobs, it also reflects tens of thousands of women who left the workforce last month, more than 90,000, according to government figures. Even while moms across the board have faced problems with childcare during the pandemic, research has shown that Black mothers in particular have faced the toughest childcare issues during the pandemic.</p> <p>Wilson said there are multiple policies that need to be in place to address the unemployment rate gap but noted the complacency policymakers seem to have with the two-to-one disparity between the Black and White unemployment rates.</p> <p>“Part of the challenge and difficulty in addressing it is that it sort of becomes normalized, like ‘Oh, OK – that’s just how it works’, without us actually sort of questioning and interrogating the way that we understand those disparities,” Wilson said.</p>
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HEADLINE	12/24 Omicron England drives record infections
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/dec/24/one-in-35-people-have-covid-in-uk-as-omicron-drives-record-infections">https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/dec/24/one-in-35-people-have-covid-in-uk-as-omicron-drives-record-infections</a>
GIST	The growing wave of Omicron cases has helped drive Covid rates to <a href="#">record highs</a> in England, with one in 35 people now infected across the country and one in 20 infected in London, official figures have shown.

Based on random swab tests taken in the community, the Office for National Statistics estimates that almost 3% or 1,544,600 people in England had Covid between 13 and 19 December, with infection rates higher than last week in all regions except the south-west.

Rates of Covid were highest in London in the week studied, and lowest in the north-east where the rate was one in 55 people, according to the [ONS infection survey](#) released on Friday.

While [London](#) remains the centre of the omicron wave, the ONS said swab results compatible with infections of the new variant rose in all regions of England, and in all nations of the UK, compared with last week's survey.

Esther Sutherland, a senior statistician on the Covid-19 infection survey, said the rise in infections was across almost all age groups, with the figures suggesting the rapid spread of omicron was "a significant factor in recent trends".

Further data from the ONS showed people from Pakistani, Caribbean and African backgrounds were least likely to have taken up the offer of a [Covid booster or third dose of the vaccine](#), which provides substantial extra protection against omicron.

Uptake of boosters and third doses among those 50 and over was 42.2%, 44.4% and 45.4% respectively, the ONS said. Figures up to 12 December suggest more than a quarter of people of black Caribbean ethnicity have yet to receive a first dose of Covid vaccine, making them the least vaccinated ethnic group in the UK.

"This is deeply worrying because in many ways I fear a repetition of what happened in the first wave, where ... we saw this rather alarming and disturbing disparity in illness and deaths among ethnic minorities from Covid," Dr Chaand Nagpaul, the council chair at the British Medical Association, told BBC Radio 4's World at One.

"What we know now of course is that the patients, people who are becoming seriously ill, who are being hospitalised, are those who have not been vaccinated and those who have not had their boosters," he added.

The ONS figure came as documents from the Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies (Sage) noted that infection rates and hospitalisations were "rising fast" in London, and that "as infections move into older age groups, a large wave of hospital admissions should be expected".

According to the [minutes of a Sage meeting](#) held on Thursday, scientists were unclear whether an apparent fall in the growth rate in omicron infections was a genuine slowing down in the spread of the virus.

A real slowdown could be driven by changes in people's mixing patterns and behaviour – such as being more risk averse in the run up to Christmas – or a fall in the number of susceptible people to infect in particular groups. But other factors may feed in, the scientists stress, such as people not testing in case they have to isolate, and longer testing turnaround times.

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HEADLINE	12/25 By the numbers: catastrophic year wildfires
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2021/dec/25/what-the-numbers-tells-us-about-a-catastrophic-year-of-wildfires">https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2021/dec/25/what-the-numbers-tells-us-about-a-catastrophic-year-of-wildfires</a>
GIST	<p>2021 proved another disastrous fire year for the American west.</p> <p>Amid a historic drought and record-breaking heatwaves, wildfires that erupted across the US burned close to 7.7m acres. Some broke records that had only recently been set. And while the amount of land burned this year didn't reach 2020 levels, a troubling new trend emerged: fires are getting harder to fight.</p>

“With the conditions we saw this year and everything leading up to it – historic drought, these prolonged dry, heatwaves – everything together made it a very challenging year,” said Aitor Bidaburu, a wildfire program manager for the US Fire Administration. His biggest takeaway on the blazes “was just the intensity with which they burned”, he says.

The statistics tell the story of a fire season that now stretches far into the year, fires that have grown more ferocious, and climatic conditions that are causing the blazes to behave erratically and dangerously.

Here’s a look at the fire year in numbers.

### **A long and intense season**

The season of high fire threat is stretching longer and longer.

- Wildfires used to be largely confined to a four-month period but the threats are now felt through the year. By 21 June, close to 29,000 wildfires had already ignited across the US – roughly [4,000 more than average](#) years according to the National Interagency Fire Center.
- The threats didn’t subside after the summer and autumn. Blazes burned through Montana and Colorado into December this year and fire weather warnings prompted power safety shutoffs in southern California over the Thanksgiving holiday in late November.

### **Megablazes are becoming the norm**

Megablazes – fires that blacken more than 100,000 acres – were once considered a career highlight for firefighters. But they’re increasingly becoming the norm. “We hear from the first responders that they have never seen fire behavior like this in their careers,” said Bidaburu. “[Megablazes] are becoming routine. During the summers we are seeing them on a weekly basis.”

- The number of fires that burn each year is trending downward – but the average [acreage burnt by the blazes is rising](#).
- In California, [roughly 2.6m acres](#) of land went up in flames this year, eclipsing the 5-year-average of 1.4m.
- Eight of the top 15 largest wildfires in the golden state occurred in the last two years

### **Flames are reaching new heights**

Fires committed feats never seen before. “For the first 25 years of my career, fires moved in a certain way and in a certain fashion but now they are acting very uncharacteristically,” said Jon Heggie, CalFire battalion chief. “There’s no denying that fires are burning hotter and faster.”

- The Dixie fire, which burned close to a million acres in California over three months, became the first fire to cross over the Sierra Nevada range. Soon after, the 221,775-acre Caldor fire became the second.
- The Windy fire and the KNP Complex fire, which tore through California’s Sequoia & Kings Canyon national parks, resulted [in the deaths of up to 3,637 mature sequoia trees](#) – a species that thrived through fires for centuries.

### **Landscapes are turning into tinderboxes**

Fire risk across the American west was exacerbated by historic conditions: a record-breaking drought and unprecedented heatwaves. Higher heat not only dries landscapes faster, making them prone to burn, it also reduces snow, reducing the water flow into rivers and reservoirs. “You are just racking up year after year of high temperatures and below-average precipitation” said Andrew Hoell, a National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration meteorologist who serves as co-lead on the agency’s drought taskforce. “It’s just a lousy situation.”

- 2021 [delivered the hottest summers](#) on record in California, Nevada, and Oregon. Washington and Arizona had their second hottest summer this year.
- By the end of November – even after heavy rains doused the Pacific north-west and northern California – [80% of the west remained categorized in severe drought](#). Half of the region was still experiencing extreme drought.

### **Enormous pressure on resources**



Combined, the fires put enormous stress on the US' firefighting resources. Bidaburu says the increasing intensity and the proximity and danger to communities has driven up costs. "You get these intense fires and they require more resources, the urgency is higher, the public safety aspect is much higher," he says.

- The cost of battling these blazes in 2021 was more than \$4.4bn, according to the NIFC – more than double the 10-year average for federal firefighting costs. That's the most ever spent on a fire season by the federal government and these numbers don't include state and local expenditures.
- Federal agencies categorize "preparedness levels" on a scale of one to five to denote the amount of resources deployed to battle blazes across the country. This year, the country was cast in categories four and five for 14 consecutive weeks, the longest stretch ever documented at the two highest levels. At level four, more than half of all national firefighting resources are deployed. At level five, resources are nearly exhausted.

### Shifting strategies

The intensity of this year's fire season has raised the stakes, forcing governments to adapt their suppression strategies. If high greenhouse gas emissions continue, climate models show that the risk of large wildfires [could jump up to 6-times higher](#) in the next three decades.

"We are seeing a dramatic increase and this environment we are in is here to stay," said Heggie, the CalFire chief. States like [California](#) are ramping up mitigation efforts and prioritizing programs to educate the public on fire safety, but are constantly fighting to keep up with the changing conditions.

- Officials are trying to plan five steps ahead of the fire, anticipating that the flames could spread 10 times faster than they once did, according to Heggie. Blazes once battled over two to three weeks are now burning the same amount of space in a single day.
- Budgets are being boosted. Biden's \$1.2tn infrastructure bill [includes \\$3.3bn for wildfire management](#), including pay increases and programs for firefighters bearing the brunt of the increasing intensity. In California, [legislators granted close to \\$1bn in wildfire prevention](#) for the 2021 fiscal year and at least \$200m annually over the next 6 years. [A \\$15m increase in funding](#) was included in NOAA's budget request for fiscal year 2022 to fund fire weather research and observations that will give communities access to key predictions.
- In the social safety-net and climate bill still in Congress, Democrats have proposed spending \$27bn on protecting the nation's forests, which includes \$14bn for fuel reduction projects.

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HEADLINE	<b>12/25 FDA vaccine advisory group: vaccines safe</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.theguardian.com/society/2021/dec/25/us-fda-vaccine-advisory-group-covid-vaccines-flu">https://www.theguardian.com/society/2021/dec/25/us-fda-vaccine-advisory-group-covid-vaccines-flu</a>
GIST	<p>It is likely that in the "before times", few Americans knew that independent experts advised the US Food and Drug Administration (FDA) on the safety and efficacy of vaccines, and that the FDA usually took their advice.</p> <p>Less than a year into the Covid-19 pandemic, that quickly changed.</p> <p>The <a href="#">Vaccines and Related Biological Products Advisory Committee</a> became arguably the most closely watched group of experts in America's federal government. The media <a href="#">followed hearings</a>, and thousands of Americans tuned in live to see whether these scientists considered Covid vaccines safe and effective.</p> <p>For the chair of that advisory group, Dr Arnold Monto, a professor at the University of Michigan's school of public health, the last year has been a revelation.</p> <p>"It's really difficult, given the fact we never thought this [pandemic] was going to happen in this way ... it's all been a revelation," said Monto. "And the revelation is also how societal beliefs would affect what we are seeing in terms of the continuation of severe disease."</p> <p>Ultimately, experts and Monto did say vaccines were safe and effective, and the FDA authorized Covid-19 vaccines for emergency use shortly thereafter. More than 237 million Americans have since received a</p>



vaccine. Through several more hearings, VRPAC has recommended vaccines to everyone older than five and booster doses to everyone older than 18.

Now, Monto is the author of a recent article in the [New England Journal of Medicine](#), in which he considers the long-term future of the pandemic, and whether scientists can learn from another disease that was once pandemic – influenza.

In an interview with the Guardian, Monto considered both this possible future – in which Covid-19 “is not going away, in spite of how well our vaccines perform” – and an incredible and perplexing year of vaccine distribution.

“The first thing is [that] we never expected our vaccines to be so good, so effective,” said Monto. “This was a very happy surprise to everybody – and it was a surprise.”

He and other scientists watched as a vaccine against Covid-19 was developed faster and more effectively than any dared to hope. Then Monto watched in astonishment as tens of millions of Americans refused to take them.

Nevertheless, he added: “Those of us who are on the front lines here, in terms of development or evaluation, are so incredulous about people not wanting to get vaccinated.”

Perhaps the most frequent question people now ask Monto is whether people will need a Covid-19 vaccine “every six months”, especially in light of the recently discovered [omicron variant](#). Pfizer recently announced that a [third shot](#) of its mRNA vaccine appears to protect as well against omicron as other variants.

“The question is: is this going to be like influenza” – against which an annual vaccine is recommended – “or is it going to be like measles?” – which requires only two doses for life-long protection. “That’s where many of us disagree.”

Data has shown immunity wanes over time. VRPAC has approved booster shots for all three vaccines, in part to prevent Covid-19 infection, even as mRNA vaccines have shown very good stable protection against hospitalisation and death. Nevertheless, it remains unclear whether three shots will provide lasting immunity against infection.

“We really don’t know how well our vaccines will be holding up,” he said. Monto said he now believes waning immunity and the continued emergence of new variants, termed “antigen drift”, make influenza a useful model for Covid-19 response.

Each year, scientists create a vaccine based on seasonal, circulating variants of the flu virus. Monto said “permanent protection from our current vaccines” is unlikely, making this model a useful basis for future Covid-19 response. And, he said, this is a future we’ve been apprehensive to consider.

“This is unprecedented, because it’s lasted so long,” said Monto. By comparison, the jolt of the [1918 influenza pandemic](#) was more acute on a population level, but lasted a shorter period of time.

“It’s been difficult to get people to focus on long-term consequences because people have been so wrong already in predictions,” said Monto. The virus “continues to create problems”.

“Whenever you think things are going to be getting better – because they have already – and are they going to continue to get better, we’ve had a new surprise,” said Monto. “And that’s why many people have tried not to think long-term for any extent, because the question then, which is difficult to answer, is: are we going to be back to normal?” And, that question implies a larger one about what the future may look like with [masks and social distancing](#).

Those “non-pharmaceutical” interventions, as scientists call them, are not addressed in Monto’s recent article, but he does give us a peek into the meaningful data of the future. Hospitalizations and deaths

among people who are vaccinated could become more important metrics than cases alone, as vaccines become a long-term tool to mitigate the worst effects of Covid-19. The development of [drugs to treat](#) those infected with Covid-19 will also remain important, particularly if variants impact the efficacy of those already developed, as is the case with [monoclonal antibodies](#).

However, right now, Covid-19 remains a “pandemic of the unvaccinated”.

At the time [FDA advisors voted in favor](#) of approving the first vaccine, around 285,000 Americans and 1.5m people globally had died. Today, more than 791,000 Americans and 5.2m people globally have died. In the US, many of those deaths immediately post-dated the authorization of vaccines, when they were in short supply. Now, they are widely available, but only 60.4% of the population is fully vaccinated.

“The data are clear: this is a safe vaccine,” said Monto. “The data are clear that Covid is a dangerous infection to get, even if you’re not older or having underlying conditions, because the outcomes are unpredictable.

“And you may be one of the unlucky ones that gets a severe infection.”

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HEADLINE	<b>12/25 China city 13M lockdown 3<sup>rd</sup> day; cases rise</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/dec/25/chinese-city-of-xian-sees-covid-case-rise-as-it-enters-third-day-of-lockdown">https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/dec/25/chinese-city-of-xian-sees-covid-case-rise-as-it-enters-third-day-of-lockdown</a>
GIST	<p>The Chinese city of Xian has reported an increase in daily Covid-19 infections and local companies have curtailed activity as the country’s latest hotspot entered its third day of lockdown.</p> <p>Xian, home to 13 million people, detected 75 domestically transmitted cases with confirmed symptoms on Friday, its highest daily count of the year and reversing the previous day’s decline, official data showed on Saturday.</p> <p>China as a whole reported 140 new confirmed coronavirus cases for Friday, an increase of 62% from 87 cases the day before, its health authority said on Saturday. Of the new infections, 87 were locally transmitted, compared with 55 a day earlier.</p> <p>Most of the new local cases were in the north-western province of Shaanxi, where Xian is the main city.</p> <p>Xian’s locally transmitted symptomatic cases, at 330 for the period between 9 December and 24 December, are few compared with outbreaks in many other countries, but the city has imposed heavy-handed measures in line with Beijing’s policy to contain local transmission as quickly as possible.</p> <p>Residents are banned from leaving the city, home to the world-famous Terracotta Army archaeological find, without clearance from employers or local authorities and households can send only one person to shop for necessities every two days. Other family members may not leave home unless they have essential jobs or urgent matters approved by employers or communities.</p> <p>“So far the turning point for the outbreak is yet to come, and stringent curbs are necessary,” Zhang Boli, who helped to shape China’s early Covid response and treatment, told state media.</p> <p>Local officials have also faced punishment over the outbreak and domestic flights scheduled to depart the city on Friday were cancelled.</p> <p>Xian Chenxi Aviation Technology, a supplier of aviation technology to the Chinese military, said late on Friday it had temporarily suspended production due to the outbreak, which it expects to hurt its 2021 operating income.</p>

	<p>Western Securities said on Friday its Xian-based branches have stopped offering face-to-face services to clients.</p> <p>An oncology hospital said on Saturday its outpatient department and emergency room had stopped receiving patients due to Covid, after several other hospitals made similar moves.</p> <p>Xian, which started a round of mass testing on Saturday, has announced no infections caused by the Omicron variant. Nationwide, China has reported a handful of Omicron infections among international travellers and in southern China.</p>
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<b>HEADLINE</b>	<b>12/24 Hong Kong removes Tiananmen memorials</b>
<b>SOURCE</b>	<a href="https://abcnews.go.com/International/wireStory/tiananmen-massacre-memorials-removed-hong-kong-81928205">https://abcnews.go.com/International/wireStory/tiananmen-massacre-memorials-removed-hong-kong-81928205</a>
<b>GIST</b>	<p>HONG KONG -- Universities in Hong Kong are removing memorials to the bloody suppression of the 1989 Chinese pro-democracy movement centered on Beijing's Tiananmen Square.</p> <p>The Chinese University of Hong Kong early Friday took down the "Goddess of Democracy," a statue based on a figure created by art students and brought to the square shortly before the crackdown in which hundreds, if not thousands, of people were killed.</p> <p>The removal of the monuments testifies to the ruling Communist Party's efforts to erase the bloody events from the public consciousness. It also comes as the party snuffs out democratic challenges in Hong Kong to its rule.</p> <p>On Thursday, a monument at the University of Hong Kong was dismantled, wiping out one of the city's last remaining places of public commemoration of the crackdown.</p> <p>The government has never provided a figure on casualties and the pro-democracy movement remains a taboo topic in mainland China. Hong Kong and Macao, the two semi-autonomous territories, were the only places on Chinese soil where commemorations of the crackdown were allowed until authorities banned annual candlelight vigils for two consecutive years.</p> <p>In a statement, Chinese University confirmed the removal of the statue and said it had never authorized its display and that no organization has claimed responsibility for its maintenance and management.</p> <p>Separately, Lingnan University also removed a bas relief memorial wall display dedicated to the memory of the June 4 movement.</p> <p>The university's decision was predicated on the "overall protection of the university community after a recent assessment," government-run Hong Kong Radio Television reported.</p>
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<b>HEADLINE</b>	<b>12/25 Yemen rebel attack southern Saudi Arabia</b>
<b>SOURCE</b>	<a href="https://abcnews.go.com/International/wireStory/yemeni-rebel-attack-southern-saudi-arabia-kills-people-81935149">https://abcnews.go.com/International/wireStory/yemeni-rebel-attack-southern-saudi-arabia-kills-people-81935149</a>
<b>GIST</b>	<p>DUBAI, United Arab Emirates -- A Yemeni rebel attack on Saudi Arabia's southern border town of Jizan killed two people and wounded seven more late Friday, Saudi state-run media reported.</p> <p>Yemen's Houthi rebels launched a projectile that killed a Saudi citizen and Yemeni resident in the southwestern Saudi province of Jizan, the official Saudi Press Agency reported. Six of the wounded are Saudis and one is a Bangladeshi national, Saudi media said.</p> <p>Shrapnel also smashed into nearby cars and shops.</p>

The fatal cross-border attack marks an escalation in Yemen's long-running civil war. Saudi-led military coalition airstrikes struck Sanaa earlier on Friday, hitting a military camp near the city center, Saudi media reported. Houthi media said the strikes had hit a populated neighborhood, damaging homes.

On Saturday, Yemeni Brig. Gen. Yehia Sarie, a Houthi spokesman, said the rebels fired three ballistic missiles on Jizan, targeting what he described as “vital and sensitive” sites there. He provided no further details.

Yemen's war erupted in 2014 when the Iran-backed Houthis seized Sanaa and much of the country's north. Months later, the U.S.-backed Saudi-led coalition intervened to oust the Houthis and restore the internationally recognized government. The war has settled into a stalemate and spawned the world's worst humanitarian disaster.

Throughout the conflict, the Houthis have increasingly staged drone attacks and fired missiles across the border at airports, oil facilities and military installations within the kingdom.

Those assaults have rarely caused substantial damage, but over the years have wounded dozens and rattled global oil markets. Within Yemen, the Saudi-led bombing campaign has drawn international criticism for hitting non-military targets such as hospitals and wedding parties in the Arab world's most impoverished nation.

Yemen's civil war has killed some 130,000 people, including thousands of civilians.

Earlier this week the Center for Strategic and International Studies, a Washington-based think tank, reported that attacks by the Houthi rebels on Saudi Arabia have more than doubled this year from last year. Based on an analysis of thousands of Houthi attacks between 2016 and 2021, it said Houthi attacks on the kingdom averaged 78 a month this year, compared to 38 a month last year.

The cross-border assaults provide a broader view of the regional proxy war between Tehran and Riyadh. Although the regional powerhouses recently have engaged in Baghdad-brokered talks to cool down tensions, a political settlement in Yemen remains elusive.

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HEADLINE	<b>12/25 Sudan tightens security amid protests</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://abcnews.go.com/International/wireStory/sudan-tightens-security-ahead-anti-coup-protests-81937356">https://abcnews.go.com/International/wireStory/sudan-tightens-security-ahead-anti-coup-protests-81937356</a>
GIST	<p>CAIRO -- Sudanese security forces fired tear gas to disperse protesters in Khartoum on Saturday as demonstrators once again took to the streets in the country's capital and elsewhere to denounce the October military coup.</p> <p>Thousands rallied since earlier in the day, even as authorities tightened security across Khartoum, deploying troops and closing all bridges over the Nile River linking the capital with its twin city of Omdurman and the district of Bahri, the state-run SUNA news agency reported.</p> <p>Authorities had warned protesters against approaching “sovereign and strategic” sites in central Khartoum — a reference to main government buildings and key institutions. The city's Security Committee said Sudanese forces would “deal with chaos and violations,” SUNA had reported.</p> <p>The marches started in different locations, from where the protesters meant to converge on the presidential palace. Security forces used tear gas to disperse those attempting to approach the palace, said activist Nazim Sirag. There were no immediate reports of injuries.</p> <p>Rallies were also underway in other cities, including Wad Madani and Atbara.</p>

Last weekend, security forces violently dispersed demonstrators when they attempted to stage a sit-in near the presidential palace. At least three protesters were killed, and more than 300 were wounded on Sunday. There were also allegations of sexual violence, including rape and gang rape by security forces against female protesters, according to the United Nations.

Volker Perthes, the U.N. special envoy for Sudan, urged security forces to “protect” the planned protests, and refrain from arresting people for simply wanting to take part in the demonstrations.

“Freedom of expression is a human right. This includes full access to the internet. No one should be arrested for his or her intention to protest peacefully,” he said in a Twitter post.

Ahead of the demonstrations Saturday, activists reported disruption of internet access on phones in Khartoum, a tactic that had been used by the generals when they seized power on Oct. 25.

Advocacy group NetBlocks said Sudan was experiencing mobile internet disruptions early Saturday. “The mechanism appears similar or identical to that used during the October post-coup blackout,” Alp Toker, the group’s director, told The Associated Press.

The government did not comment on the disruptions.

The October military takeover upended a fragile planned transition to democratic rule and led to relentless street demonstrations across Sudan. At least 47 people were killed and hundreds wounded in protests triggered by the coup, according to a tally by a Sudanese medical group.

Prime Minister Abdalla Hamdok, a former U.N. official seen as the civilian face of Sudan’s transitional government, was reinstated last month amid international pressure in a deal that calls for an independent technocratic Cabinet under military oversight led by him.

That deal, however, was rejected by the pro-democracy movement, which insists that power be handed over to a fully civilian government tasked with leading the transition.

The prime minister is continuing discussions on finding a way out of the political deadlock. He met Friday with leaders of the country’s largest Umma Party, his office said.

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HEADLINE	<b>12/25 Report: women, children killed in Myanmar</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://abcnews.go.com/International/wireStory/report-women-children-dozens-killed-myanmar-81937526">https://abcnews.go.com/International/wireStory/report-women-children-dozens-killed-myanmar-81937526</a>
GIST	<p>BANGKOK -- Myanmar government troops rounded up villagers, some believed to be women and children, fatally shot more than 30 and set the bodies on fire, a witness and other reports said Saturday.</p> <p>The purported photos of the aftermath of the Christmas Eve massacre in eastern Mo So village, just outside Hpruso township in Kayah state where refugees were sheltering from an army offensive, spread on social media in the country, fueling outrage against the military that took power in February.</p> <p>The accounts could not be independently verified. The photos showed the charred bodies of over 30 people in three burned-out vehicles.</p> <p>A villager who said he went to the scene told The Associated Press that the victims had fled the fighting between armed resistance groups and Myanmar’s army near Koi Ngan village, which is just beside Mo So, on Friday. He said they were killed after they were arrested by troops while heading to refugee camps in the western part of the township.</p> <p>The government has not commented on the allegations, but a report in the state-run Myanma Alinn daily newspaper on Saturday said that the fighting near Mo So broke out on Friday when members of ethnic</p>

guerrilla forces, known as the Karenni National Progressive Party, and those opposed to the military drove in “suspicious” vehicles and attacked security forces after refusing to stop.

The newspaper report said they included new members who were going to attend training to fight the army, and that the seven vehicles they were traveling in were destroyed in a fire. It gave no further details about the killings.

The witness who spoke to the AP said the remains were burned beyond recognition, and children's and women's clothes were found together with medical supplies and food.

“The bodies were tied with ropes before being set on fire,” said the witness, who spoke on condition of anonymity because he feared for his safety.

He did not see the moment they were killed, but said he believed some of them were Mo So villagers who reportedly got arrested by troops on Friday. He denied that those captured were members of locally organized militia groups.

Myanmar's independent media reported on Friday that 10 Mo So villagers including children were arrested by the army and four members of the local paramilitary Border Guard Forces who went to negotiate for their release were reportedly tied up and shot in the head by the military.

The witness said the villagers and anti-government militia groups left the bodies as military troops arrived near Mo So while the bodies were being prepared for cremation. The fighting was still intense near the village.

“It’s a heinous crime and the worst incident during Christmas. We strongly condemn that massacre as a crime against humanity,” said Banyar Khun Aung, director of the Karenni Human Rights Group.

Earlier this month, government troops were also accused of rounding up villagers, some believed to be children, tying them up and slaughtering them. An opposition leader, Dr. Sasa, who uses only one name, said the civilians were burned alive.

A video of the aftermath of the Dec. 7 assault — apparently retaliation for an attack on a military convoy — showed the charred bodies of 11 people lying in a circle amid what appeared to be the remains of a hut.

Fighting meanwhile resumed Saturday in a neighboring state on the border with Thailand, where thousands of people have fled to seek shelter. Local officials said Myanmar’s military unleashed airstrikes and heavy artillery on Lay Kay Kaw, a small town controlled by ethnic Karen guerrillas, since Friday.

The military’s action prompted multiple Western governments including the U.S. Embassy to issue a joint statement condemning “serious human rights violations committed by the military regime across the country.”

“We call on the regime to immediately cease its indiscriminate attacks in Karen state and throughout the country, and to ensure the safety of all civilians in line with international law,” the joint statement said.

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HEADLINE	12/24 Outbreak: 3 <sup>rd</sup> Florida-based cruise ship
SOURCE	<a href="https://abcnews.go.com/Health/wireStory/3rd-florida-based-ship-outbreak-state-cases-rise-81932406">https://abcnews.go.com/Health/wireStory/3rd-florida-based-ship-outbreak-state-cases-rise-81932406</a>
GIST	<p>MIAMI -- A COVID-19 outbreak took place on a South Florida-based cruise ship for the third time this week, as the number of coronavirus cases in Florida hit its highest level since the start of the pandemic.</p> <p>An undisclosed number of passengers and crew aboard the Carnival Freedom cruise caught the virus so the ship was denied entry to Bonaire and Aruba, Carnival said in a statement.</p>



	<p>The ship has 2,497 passengers and 1,112 crew members and was scheduled to return to Miami on Sunday following an 8-day cruise. Passengers were required to be vaccinated and they were tested before leaving last Saturday, according to Carnival.</p> <p>“Carnival Freedom is following all protocols and has a small number on board who are in isolation due to a positive COVID test,” the statement said. “Our protocols anticipate this possibility and we implement them as necessary to protect the health and safety of our guests and crew.”</p> <p>Ashley Peterson, a passenger on the ship, tweeted a photo of a Dec. 22 letter from the ship's captain apologizing for being unable to make stops in Aruba and Bonaire. The letter said passengers would get \$100 per room in onboard credit, as well refunds for planned excursions.</p> <p>It was the third outbreak this week affecting cruise ships operated by Carnival and Royal Caribbean departing Miami and Fort Lauderdale.</p> <p>Meanwhile, Florida had 31,758 new COVID-19 cases on Friday, breaking a record for the most cases in a single day since the start of the pandemic in the U.S. in March 2020, according to data from the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.</p> <p>The new record was driven by the spread of the new omicron variant through the Sunshine State.</p> <p>The previous single-day highest number of cases was in last August, during the height of the delta variant wave in Florida, when 27,802 cases were reported.</p>
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<b>HEADLINE</b>	<b>12/24 Iran fires 16 ballistic missiles during drill</b>
<b>SOURCE</b>	<a href="https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2021/dec/24/iran-says-it-fired-16-ballistic-missiles-during-an/">https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2021/dec/24/iran-says-it-fired-16-ballistic-missiles-during-an/</a>
<b>GIST</b>	<p>TEHRAN — Iran’s paramilitary Revolutionary Guard fired more than a dozen surface-to-surface ballistic missiles, the official IRNA news agency reported Friday.</p> <p>The report said the Guard fired 16 missiles during an ongoing major military exercise across the country’s south. It said the name of missiles were Emad, Ghadr, Sejjil, Zalzal, Dezful and Zolfaghar and that their range is from 350 to 2000 kilometers (220 to 1250 miles). The short-range and medium-range missiles, Iran has said, can reach U.S. bases in the region as well as archenemy Israel.</p> <p>It said the missiles successfully hit one target at the same time as 10 drones simultaneously hit their targets. State TV showed missiles launching in the desert.</p> <p>Iran had displayed and test fired the missiles in the past.</p> <p>Major General Mohammad Hossein Bagheri, the chief of staff of Iran’s Armed Forces, said the planned drill was an answer to Israel’s recent “massive but pointless threats” to Iran.</p> <p>Bagheri said, “This was a tiny part of hundreds of missiles that can hit any hostile target simultaneously.”</p> <p>Israel has long seen Iran’s nuclear program as a threat and seeks a harder line by the U.S. and international community. Iran insists its nuclear program is peaceful.</p> <p>During the second day of the drill on Tuesday, Iran launched cruise missiles, too.</p> <p>The Guard in the past has said it has cruise missiles with ranges of 1,000 kilometers (620 miles). It also has missiles that range up to 2,000 kilometers (1,250 miles).</p> <p>From time to time, Iran holds military exercises, saying they are aimed at improving the readiness of its forces and testing new weapons.</p>

The five-day annual exercise that began on Monday came days after the breakup of talks to revive Tehran's nuclear deal with world powers. Iran has accelerated its nuclear advances as negotiations to return to the accord struggle to make headway. The talks will resume on Monday.

Former President Donald Trump pulled the United States out of the nuclear deal and re-imposed crushing sanctions on Iran in 2018. Tehran has since started enriching uranium up to 60% purity - a short technical step from the 90% needed to make an atomic bomb.

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HEADLINE	<b>12/24 Manufacturing jobs 'reshoring' in US</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2021/dec/24/manufacturing-jobs-reshoring-us-due-supply-chain-w/">https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2021/dec/24/manufacturing-jobs-reshoring-us-due-supply-chain-w/</a>
GIST	<p>The supply chain crisis and the pandemic have reinforced an economic maxim that executives at manufacturer Acme Alliance in Northbrook, Illinois, have emphasized for two decades: Keep your operations and jobs near your customers.</p> <p>A maker of custom finished aluminum die-cast components for autos, heavy trucks and agricultural machinery, Acme officials estimate that 20% of their U.S. sales over the past five years have brought back jobs to the U.S.</p> <p>"We keep telling our customers that the best strategy is to source locally," said Acme President Mauri Zaccarelli Mendes in an interview. "You reduce your level of inventory, your quality is better, you save a lot of costs with traveling. So finally, after this whole problem with COVID and now these logistics issues that we've been seeing all over the world, they realize that it makes a lot of sense."</p> <p>Other companies increasingly are following Acme's example. The rising cost of doing business in China also makes it more attractive to move jobs back to the U.S., analysts say.</p> <p>The "reshoring" of jobs to the U.S. from overseas is expected to reach more than 200,000 this year, higher than the previous peak of 180,000 jobs in 2017, when the Trump administration's regulatory relief and business tax cuts were just starting to take effect, according to Harry Moser, president of the Reshoring Initiative, which tracks jobs coming back to the U.S.</p> <p>"The pandemic and the supply chain disruptions that resulted have made companies more aware that being dependent on something that's coming from halfway around the world, has to get through two ports across the ocean and is coming from a potential adversary, China in this case, that there's more risk than they thought there was," Mr. Moser said.</p> <p>The development has benefited states such as Ohio, which is marketing itself as "an open and secure supply chain location." At least 37 companies have announced this year the reshoring of a total of more than 12,000 jobs in Ohio, which offers a variety of grants to encourage employers to relocate there.</p> <p>Foreign direct investment in U.S. manufacturing reached a new record of \$1.88 trillion in 2020, according to the National Association of Manufacturers. In 2005, the level was \$499.9 billion. NAM said it expects continued growth in this sector, partly due to "more companies reevaluating their supply chain in the midst of current disruptions."</p> <p>Among the largest businesses returning U.S. jobs in the past decade are General Motors, Boeing, Toyota, Mahindra, Volkswagen, Volvo, Caterpillar and Intel Corp.</p> <p>The shortage of semiconductor chips is playing a prominent role in rising foreign direct investment in the U.S.</p>

Samsung Electronics Co. announced last month its plans to build a \$17 billion chip-making plant in Taylor, Texas, which is expected to create about 1,800 jobs. The town offered major property-tax breaks to the South Korean giant.

Taiwan Semiconductor Manufacturing Co. plans to spend \$100 billion over the next three years to build new chip factories, as does Intel Corp., with proposals for new factories in the U.S. and Europe.

The Biden administration is encouraging more U.S. production of semiconductors and electric-vehicle batteries, and lawmakers are pushing for \$52 billion in industry subsidies for new semiconductor-making plants.

The governors of Michigan, Illinois, Wisconsin, North Carolina, Kentucky, Pennsylvania, Kansas and California urged House leaders last month to pass the CHIPS Act, which has been approved by the Senate.

The U.S. accounted for only 12% of global production capacity of semiconductors in 2020 — down from 37% in 1990, according to the Semiconductor Industry Association.

While the relative cost of wages and benefits in the U.S. historically has prompted companies to offshore jobs, wages in China have been rising 10% to 15% per year for the last 20 years, Mr. Moser said. More companies in recent years are looking at a “total cost of ownership” model that factors in trade disputes, increased U.S. competitiveness and rising Chinese wages, he said.

“The Chinese labor costs to make a typical part expressed in dollars is now five times as high as it was 20 years ago, and the U.S. has stayed almost constant,” he said.

Manufacturer Victaulic, which makes pipe-joining systems, announced plans in 2017 to spend tens of millions of dollars expanding plants in the Lehigh Valley of Pennsylvania. Company officials said one consideration was that parts from China could take six weeks to arrive in the U.S., while filling orders from its U.S. operations instead could be done in a matter of days.

Acme Alliance also has plants in China and Brazil but focuses on supplying its customers from the manufacturing source closest to them.

“When you see supply chains that are stretched across the world, and you have any sort of interference, you see what the issues are,” said Matt Thavis, Acme’s director of value stream development. “So our model is we are a global company. We are big believers in regional sourcing. We don’t warehouse any parts here [in the U.S.] that are made in China.”

Despite the firm’s success, Mr. Mendes said Acme is also struggling with late orders due to supply chain problems with vendors who “don’t have enough components to finish the product.” He also said the firm has been unable to fill some positions due to the U.S. labor shortage.

“We are still not able to hire more people. It’s pretty hard,” Mr. Mendes said. “Even if it’s a little bit over average wage, we are not able to get people.”

Mr. Thavis said Acme hasn’t based its decisions on incentives or other policies coming out of Washington.

“We don’t rely on politics to do business,” he said. “We just think that our model makes sense. It’s just the kind of a decree that if you’re going to assemble and sell goods within a region, it makes sense to source those components within that region.”

The progress in bringing back jobs to the U.S. hasn’t completely reversed an offshoring trend that has been decades in the making. A recent survey by the American Chamber of Commerce in Shanghai found that 71% of U.S. manufacturers had no plans to move production out of China, while only 4% said they would transfer some to the U.S., Barrons reported last year.

And U.S. companies have directly invested about \$260 billion in Chinese operations since the early 1990s, according to an analysis from the Rhodium Group.

Still, Mr. Moser says there has been a “tangible shift in corporate decision-making.” He said the shortage of personal protective equipment (PPE) in the U.S. at the start of the pandemic in 2020 accelerated a reshoring process that had already begun.

“Now that makes the companies more sensitive to all these other related disruption issues,” he said.

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HEADLINE	12/24 Omicron workplace outbreaks grow
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.washingtonpost.com/business/2021/12/24/workers-outbreaks-omicron-restaurants/">https://www.washingtonpost.com/business/2021/12/24/workers-outbreaks-omicron-restaurants/</a>
GIST	<p>Restaurants, stores, schools and offices have been closing this past week, as <a href="#">coronavirus</a> outbreaks seeded by the omicron variant pick up speed in many areas across the country, forcing difficult decisions about paychecks and health risks for workers at the height of the holiday season.</p> <p>Closures have silenced bars, <a href="#">restaurants</a> and entertainment venues in parts of <a href="#">New York City</a>, <a href="#">Houston</a>, <a href="#">Chicago</a>, <a href="#">D.C.</a> and <a href="#">the Bay Area</a> after outbreaks or exposures among their staff, in an uncanny flashback to the earliest days of the pandemic.</p> <p>Some Walmarts have begun shuttering <a href="#">for cleaning and sanitizing</a>. Apple has closed stores in <a href="#">Texas</a>, <a href="#">Maryland</a> and <a href="#">Florida</a> in recent weeks because of outbreaks. And <a href="#">countless schools</a>, college campuses, medical <a href="#">offices</a> and other workplaces have reported temporary closures due to confirmed coronavirus cases in recent days. Google searches for phrases such as “covid at work” are at their highest level since early September.</p> <p>The outbreaks are a reminder of the risks that front line workers continue to face on the job, and the central role that workplaces can play in the transmission of the virus. And while a vaccine or testing requirement from the federal government is poised to start taking effect in January, the omicron variant <a href="#">is more transmissible</a> than other strains, which has led to outbreaks with large numbers of workers testing positive, sometimes despite vaccines and even masking.</p> <p>Workers, advocates and labor unions are warning that the government support that helped workers through previous chapters of the pandemic — mandatory sick pay, paid time off to care for family members and substantial unemployment benefits for those who lost jobs — will be in short supply this time around, nearly two years into the public health crisis.</p> <p>“What we’re going to see is how few lessons we’ve learned,” said Rebecca Kolins Givan, a labor expert at Rutgers University. “Because of everything from insufficient access to testing, to not enough available child care, workers are going to struggle in the same ways as they’ve struggled in the previous surges. We haven’t seen solutions to all of the systemic problems that workers faced the last time around. So the problems will still be there.”</p> <p>Love Lopez, 47, was sent home from her job at the front desk of a hotel in Temecula, Calif., this week after managers informed her that three of her co-workers had tested positive. It was the third staff outbreak at the hotel since August, when she began working there. By the end of Wednesday, that number had grown to six co-workers who tested positive, she said.</p> <p>Lopez likes her job but said she worries that the safety protocols leave workers like her vulnerable. Staff are not required to be vaccinated, she said, and the hotel does a poor job enforcing its mask mandate for unvaccinated workers in the close quarters where staff gather when not in front of guests.</p> <p>“When I go in the back, almost every single employee that is in the back, and it’s up to a dozen employees, they’re not wearing them at all,” she said.</p>

The hotel gave her two hours of paid time to get tested on Wednesday and will pay her should she need to miss work because of a positive test result, which she is thankful for. But she was not paid for nine days off work that she had to take earlier this year after being exposed to a sick family member. A mother of four, she's concerned about an upcoming omicron wave, though cases in Riverside County are only rising gradually at the moment.

"It's starting to really, really worry me because I'm really afraid to bring something home," she said. Comprehensive statistics about the number of closures across the country don't exist at the moment, but there are [strong indications](#) that the hospitality industry is among the hardest hit so far.

In New York, service sector employee hours fell from 28.2 on average in November to 21.8 for the first three weeks of December, according to a new analysis by HR and payroll processor Gusto. Usually, hours worked steadily increase from November through December due to the busy holiday shopping and dining season, said Gusto economist Luke Pardue.

Recent data from restaurant reservation service OpenTable shows a steep drop in bookings from Dec. 19 to Dec. 20 in metro areas nationwide, with Monday bringing the fewest number of reservations since June. Overall, it's been the worst two-week stretch for restaurants since May, according to the data.

Restaurant owner Aaron Steingold, 46, couldn't speak to a reporter for this story because he'd lost his voice from covid, even though he was vaccinated. He texted responses while muddling through chills, fatigue, aches and brain fog.

He closed Steingold's of Chicago, a paean to the classic Jewish delis of New York's Lower East Side, upon hearing of his manager's first positive test last Wednesday. His plan was to reopen last Saturday, with that manager quarantined, but then Steingold and another staffer awoke with symptoms.

"We are losing a ton — roughly 40 percent of our busiest month of the year," he typed. In addition to the loss of business, there's the contents of the refrigerators, which had to be donated to food banks, and the hourly wages of those he had furloughed. The restaurant had recently relocated and then expanded, so he was counting on December to make up for some of his losses.

"We test regularly, and in 22 months had not had a single positive test in the business," he texted.

Dennis Ngo, chef-owner of Di An Di, a Vietnamese restaurant in Brooklyn, decided to close his restaurant until Jan. 4.

Last Wednesday, he closed the place for two days after finding out a staff member had been exposed. After reopening for the weekend, business had dropped by 40 percent, he said.

For Ngo and many restaurant workers, one problem is the lack of access to rapid tests, with extensive waits at testing clinics.

"If testing were abundant, we could get answers immediately," he said. "I would have hoped we'd be better prepared this time around," he said.

Restaurant workers don't tend to get sick pay. The Restaurant Opportunities Centers United, a worker advocacy organization based in New York, said that internal surveys had shown that some 10 percent of restaurant workers said earlier this year that they'd gone into work with covid-like symptoms for fear of missing work.

"One of the basic things that restaurant workers need immediately, and should have gotten from the start of it, was paid sick leave," said Teofilo Reyes, chief program officer with the group. "The omicron wave is an indication that things are not getting better as we progress this year."

Aaron Gregory Smith, executive director of the U.S. Bartenders' Guild, said restaurants and bars are likely in for a rocky ride. "We need to be prepared for wild swings for the next six weeks," he said.

T. Cole Newton, who owns two bars in New Orleans, said that a number of bars have closed this week — some for a few days so everyone can get tested, some for the rest of the year.

"I expect pretty much everyone will catch omicron," he said, adding that he had to man one of his bars himself because a bartender was out to get tested.

Colleen Hughes, a bartender in Charlotte, said employees have begun to call in sick in the past couple of days, stretching the staff thin.

"We would close if we generally felt unsafe, but it's difficult to make that judgment," she said. "There would be 100 employees in this building that would lose their income and that's kind of terrifying."

Other industries have yet to feel a discernible impact from omicron. Betsy Booren, senior vice president of regulatory affairs for the trade group Consumer Brands Association, said that many food companies anticipate seeing the effects in January, after Americans have spent the holidays getting together with family and friends.

Still, there are some hopes the country has learned some critical lessons, and that vaccinations and booster shots will help insulate workplaces from worse crises.

Meat processing facilities saw months of closures and bottlenecks, resulting in shortfalls and price increases for consumers, in the pandemic's earlier waves. According to a Tyson Foods official, the company operated at 30 percent of capacity at beef and pork plants last spring, as the company struggling to get face shields, masks and barriers between workstations and a vaccine mandate by Nov. 1.

With the new protocols still in place, Tyson has seen a decrease of more than 90 percent of coronavirus cases, since they announced the vaccine mandate, according to the Tyson official. And they have begun offering boosters at some facilities.

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HEADLINE	<b>12/24 Africa CDC: interpret data with caution</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2021/12/24/omicron-coronavirus-south-africa-mild/">https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2021/12/24/omicron-coronavirus-south-africa-mild/</a>
GIST	<p>Early data from South Africa suggesting that the omicron variant may cause fewer hospitalizations and instances of severe symptoms than the <a href="#">coronavirus</a> wild type and its variants should not be extrapolated to other countries, the head of the Africa Centers for Disease Control and Prevention said Thursday.</p> <p>"We should interpret the data from South Africa with a lot of caution and in the context that this is early days," said John Nkengasong, director of the Africa CDC, at a news briefing. "Let's be careful not to extrapolate what we [are] seeing in South Africa across the continent or across the world."</p> <p>A recent analysis of some 161,000 coronavirus cases in South Africa between October and early December indicated that omicron was 80 percent less likely to lead to hospitalization than the delta variant and that for patients who were hospitalized, the risk of severe illness was 30 percent lower.</p> <p>The paper, published Wednesday by South Africa's National Institute for Communicable Diseases, has not been peer-reviewed. But it comes amid other signs that the omicron wave in South Africa has quickly started subsiding.</p> <p>The country logged over 21,000 new infections on Thursday, according to government data, down from nearly 38,000 on Dec. 12. As of early this week, positivity rates have fallen, along with stress on testing infrastructure.</p>



Nkengasong also noted that South Africa, where the median age is 28, has a relatively young population. That is a full decade lower than the median age in the United States, according to Census Bureau data. And Salim Abdool Karim, a top infectious-disease scientist from the country, [recently told](#) The Washington Post that South Africans with omicron are more likely to produce a robust antibody response since over 70 percent of the country's residents have been infected by non-omicron coronavirus variants.

While South Africa's vaccination rate — about 26 percent of its population has been fully immunized, according to Our World in Data — is lower than the global average, it is higher than the immunization rate for the African continent.

Nkengasong, who leads the African Union's public health body, used his Thursday briefing to urge governments of the 55-member bloc to ramp up vaccination programs. The aim, he said, is fully immunizing 70 percent of the continent's eligible population by the end of next year. The figure is currently 10 percent.

"Our campaign should be aiming at pushing out people who have not received their first dose to receive their first dose, [pushing] out people who have received their first dose to get their second dose, and for the eligible population to get their booster dose," he said. "It's a collective action that we should really encourage everyone."

Data from elsewhere is being closely watched in the United States, where the omicron variant has become dominant, according to U.S. CDC estimates from Monday. A nationwide surge in case numbers ahead of the holiday season has led to [disappointment](#) and fatigue as the global pandemic enters its third year.

There are also [flickers of optimism from Britain](#), where the omicron variant pushed the daily case count past 100,000 for the first time Wednesday. Early research from Scotland, which has not been peer-reviewed, found that people infected with the omicron variant were almost 60 percent less likely to enter the hospital than those with delta. Another study from England spelled out a similar trajectory.

The scientists qualified the "encouraging" conclusions by warning of the reduced efficacy of vaccines against infection by omicron. (The makers of the Pfizer-BioNTech and Moderna shots say that booster doses appear to restore significant protection against infection.) The British researchers also noted that the highly transmissible nature of omicron could still overwhelm hospitals.

But Karim, the South African epidemiologist, offered a more upbeat outlook in a [recent interview](#). "Now we're going down, right back down," he said, adding that he expected "every other country, or almost every other, to follow the same trajectory."

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HEADLINE	<b>12/24 Pediatric hospitals in parts of US filling fast</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.washingtonpost.com/health/2021/12/24/omicron-children-hospitalizations-us/">https://www.washingtonpost.com/health/2021/12/24/omicron-children-hospitalizations-us/</a>
GIST	<p>This time last year, Claudia Hoyen, a pediatric infectious-disease specialist in Cleveland, remembers staring at an eerily empty hospital as Christmas approached. With many schools shut and activities canceled, most children had been sheltered from the coronavirus. Today, nearly every bed is taken.</p> <p>"We are in a difficult situation," said Hoyen, at University Hospitals Rainbow Babies &amp; Children's Hospital. "With omicron, we are now having this new surge on top of what was left over from delta." Add to that the normal cases of the flu, broken bones, scheduled treatments for children with cancer and other conditions, she said, and the hospital is "in a crisis."</p> <p>As the United States enters its third year of the pandemic, <a href="#">forecasters are predicting</a> another ugly winter, but this time, children as well as adults are being affected. Pediatric hospitalizations for covid are surging in many parts of the country, alongside the arrival of omicron — as of Monday, the dominant strain in the United States — with about 800 new admissions each day for the past three days.</p>

Ohio, Texas, Pennsylvania and New York have been hit particularly hard. As of Thursday, there were 1,987 confirmed or suspected pediatric covid-19 patients hospitalized nationally, a 31 percent jump in 10 days, according to a Washington Post analysis. Since the pandemic began, nearly 7.4 million children and adolescents have been infected, with 170,000 more added to that total in the last week alone, according to [the American Academy of Pediatrics](#).

U.S. doctors interviewed this week said that while they are seeing record positive results from children's coronavirus tests, the vast majority of cases so far have been mild and look a lot like the common cold.

Indeed, several studies, including [a pair published this week from Scotland and England](#), suggest omicron is sending fewer people overall to the hospital — welcome news. But public health officials have been on high alert about one group, children under 5, who are the last group ineligible for vaccines in the United States. Earlier this month [South Africa reported big jumps in hospital admissions](#) for that age group. The accuracy and significance of the South African data is unclear, but on Thursday, the United Kingdom released [data](#) showing a bump in admissions for that age group, too. Hospital admissions ending Dec. 19 were at 3.64 per 100,000 for children ages 0 to 4 — three times the rate for those ages 5 to 14.

That trend is not yet evident in the United States. Doctors and officials at eight children's hospitals in areas of mounting infections said most of their patients are unvaccinated adolescents with underlying health conditions, as has been the case for most of the pandemic, although on any given day, a wide range of ages may be represented.

Still, Aaron Glatt, chief of infectious diseases at Mount Sinai South Nassau, acknowledged colleagues are monitoring a “signal” of a possible increase in hospitalizations of children under age 2: “It’s unknown yet whether the lack of severity that seems to be present in adults will also be true in children,” he said.

Even with less severe disease projected overall as a result of omicron, pediatric specialists said they fear more children may be admitted to hospitals in coming weeks given [the sheer number likely to be infected](#).

Adrienne Randolph, a critical care physician and anesthesiologist at Boston Children's Hospital who leads a network of researchers studying the coronavirus in children, said that now is the time for parents who had hesitated about getting eligible children vaccinated to schedule the shots.

“Everybody is getting prepared for the worst at the moment,” she said.

### **Cold-like symptoms**

In March 2020, when the first wave of the coronavirus hit the United States, the initial presentation of covid in children tended to be somewhat distinct — with many reporting a headache, stomach pain, or loss of smell or taste.

With omicron, physicians describe messier symptoms that mimic those of cold and flu. In the United Kingdom, health officials have reported that most children with omicron infections experienced headaches, sore throats, nasal congestion and fever, with those symptoms usually lasting about three days.

In Maryland, pediatrician Aaron Milstone with Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine said emergency visits are extremely high, but few of the children have been sick enough to be admitted to the hospital thus far. He said he has seen more fevers in children with omicron infections than with past variants, and urged parents who have children with “cold” symptoms to assume “it’s omicron until proven otherwise.”

“Parents have to recognize that yes, there is cold and flu and RSV,” Milstone said. “But right now the dominant cause of symptoms that look like cold is probably covid.”

Outbreaks of respiratory illnesses like the common cold and the flu famously tend to hit the very young and the very old most severely. The elderly tend to have more preexisting medical conditions which make

them vulnerable. As for babies and preschoolers, they have fewer defenses to fight foreign invaders, said Patty Manning, chief of staff at Cincinnati Children's Hospital Medical Center.

It's not just about immature immune systems, she said, but also about how the children cough, and manage secretions and body temperature less efficiently than adults, making them more likely to be felled by colds and the flu.

With previous coronavirus variants, there appears to be something protective about that difference in the young. Why that is remains one of the biggest scientific mysteries about the coronavirus even now, two years after the World Health Organization first alerted the world to the new virus.

Most of the U.S. medical centers contacted this week said they are experiencing record volume and positivity rates among children at both their hospitals and outpatient clinics.

In Ohio, where besieged health facilities recently took out a full-page newspaper ad emblazoned with the word "Help," and the governor deployed nearly 1,200 National Guard members to set up testing sites and help medical personnel, pediatric cases are surging.

Robert McGregor, chief medical officer for Akron Children's Hospital, said the positivity rate has been so high that "we don't know the ramifications." As of Wednesday, the hospital had admitted several kids under 5, including two confirmed cases in infants and two suspected cases in nursery-age children, but most of the other 11 were teens.

"There is a sense that kids progress quicker" to severe illness, he said.

Nathan Hagstrom, chair of pediatrics at the Lehigh Valley Health Network, which operates hospitals in the Allentown-Bethlehem region of Pennsylvania, said 20 to 30 percent of coronavirus tests on school-age children and adolescents are coming back positive. He estimated that roughly two-thirds are symptomatic. Hospitalizations of children are double what they were at the previous peak last winter and the highest of the pandemic, but they still represent a small fraction of all those infected, he said.

"The good news is the probability of having serious illness goes down when you are vaccinated across all ages," he said.

He added that while a large number of children up to age 5 are testing positive, so far "they do not appear to be getting severe illness, or need any interventions or treatment."

In Houston, hospitalizations among children with covid have doubled in the past week and over 20 percent of children at outpatient clinics are testing positive for the virus.

"It's just crazy," said Stanley Spinner, chief medical officer/vice president at Texas Children's Pediatrics and Texas Children's Urgent Care. "And we are expecting those numbers to go up through the next couple of weeks."

Spinner said infections are occurring in both vaccinated and unvaccinated children — with most of those who've gotten the shots having "much less significant symptoms."

He has two grandchildren under 5 and said their parents, one of whom is a cardiac specialist at Texas Children's, are isolating from anyone who has been out in the community. "If you are not vaccinated, you are a sitting duck and children under 5 are not eligible," he explained.

In Pittsburgh, Andrew Nowalk, a pediatric infectious-disease doctor at UPMC Children's Hospital, said he is monitoring news closely from the countries hit with omicron before the United States. While the data out of Denmark and the United Kingdom is reassuring, he said he remains unsettled by the South Africa reports of very young hospitalized children. He said it's possible South Africa's data reflects differences in

the nutritional status of its children and rates of various diseases there, among other factors, that may not apply in the United States.

“I look at the South African data,” he said, “and I say a lot of prayers.”

### **MIS-C mystery**

As pediatric specialists grapple with omicron, many are also preparing for aftereffects. Those at long-haul covid clinics at many hospitals — already bursting with patients suffering from lingering symptoms after mild delta infections — anticipate more children in the coming months.

At Rainbow Babies & Children’s Hospital, one looming question has been about the rare post-viral multi-inflammatory syndrome, or MIS-C, associated with covid that appears in some children four to six weeks after an infection. As of Nov. 30, the latest data available from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, there have been 5,973 cases and 52 deaths that meet the MIS-C case definition. Scientists aren’t sure what causes the syndrome but its unpredictability — most of the children are healthy with no underlying conditions — and the suddenness with which it hits have made doctors and parents alike anxious.

One study, published in September in the Journal of Allergy and Clinical Immunology, showed a possible genetic marker that may make a child susceptible to the condition, but it’s by no means the full story since the marker is not present in all patients, said Randolph, the Boston Children’s researcher, who is a co-author.

With Cleveland just seeing the tail end of its delta wave — where the Rainbow Hospital is located — doctors are unsure the extent to which they should expect new MIS-C cases. In many other parts of the country, the dreaded cases did not materialize in the proportions expected after the delta wave. Scientists aren’t sure whether that may be a function of more vaccinations, exposure to previous variants, or delta itself.

However, Hoyen, the pediatric infectious-disease specialist, cautioned that MIS-C has not disappeared: “We had two admissions just this week.”

It’s too soon, she said, to know about omicron.

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HEADLINE	<b>12/24 Outbreak sidelines 100% vaccinated ship</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/2021/12/24/uss-milwaukee-covid-outbreak/">https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/2021/12/24/uss-milwaukee-covid-outbreak/</a>
GIST	<p>A coronavirus outbreak aboard the USS Milwaukee, whose entire crew was “100 percent immunized,” has forced the ship to remain in port after a scheduled stop in Cuba barely one week into its deployment, the Navy announced Friday.</p> <p>An unspecified “portion” of the Milwaukee’s 105-person crew is now isolated on board the ship, according to Cmdr. Kate Meadows, a spokesperson for U.S. Naval Forces Southern Command. The Navy does not disclose infection counts “at the crew/unit level,” she said in an email.</p> <p>Some of the personnel who tested positive for the virus have displayed mild symptoms, Meadows said. Officials have not determined whether the highly transmissible omicron variant — which has demonstrated an ability to evade coronavirus vaccines, leading to a surge in breakthrough infections — is responsible for the Milwaukee’s outbreak.</p> <p>The Milwaukee deployed from its home station in Mayport, Fla., on Dec. 14. In a <a href="#">news release</a> announcing the ship’s departure, the Navy said that apart from the ship’s crew, there is a detachment of Coast Guard law enforcement personnel on board, plus an aviation unit responsible for operating embarked helicopters and drones. It was not immediately clear whether the coronavirus outbreak had affected any of those passengers.</p>

	<p>Navy officials said the Milwaukee's deployment was expected to involve <a href="#">counternarcotics operations</a> in the Caribbean and Eastern Pacific.</p> <p>Photographs of the ship's crew, <a href="#">distributed by the Navy over the past month</a>, show that some personnel wear masks while others do not. Navy vessels, where personnel live in tight quarters while at sea, are particularly vulnerable to the coronavirus. The U.S. military's first major coronavirus outbreak happened last year aboard the aircraft carrier USS Theodore Roosevelt, sidelining the ship for several weeks in Guam after more than 1,000 personnel tested positive.</p> <p>U.S. military personnel are required to be vaccinated against the coronavirus, but <a href="#">tens of thousands of troops</a> have resisted those orders. Across the Navy, about 9,000 sailors remained only partially vaccinated as of this week, according to <a href="#">data maintained by the Pentagon</a>.</p>
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HEADLINE	<b>12/24 Pandemic burnout: many clergy quit</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.washingtonpost.com/religion/2021/12/24/christmas-covid-pandemic-clergy-quit/">https://www.washingtonpost.com/religion/2021/12/24/christmas-covid-pandemic-clergy-quit/</a>
GIST	<p>It was Christmas Eve and the Rev. Alyssa Aldape was getting ready for work. Over her decade in Baptist youth ministry, Dec. 24 meant prepping sermons at the church, sending out last-minute Christmas emails to her young people, robing up. After church, her Mexican American family would have tamales.</p> <p>But this Christmas Eve day, Aldape was in her Van Ness apartment, in a green turtleneck and jeans, drinking iced coffee and getting ready for her shift at the retailer Madewell. She'd clock in, then spend the afternoon folding sweaters and greeting last-minute holiday shoppers at the door with her big smile and "Hi! Welcome!"</p> <p>"At the store they're like: 'You're so good at welcoming people!'" said Aldape, her smile shifting into a chuckle and then into tears. For the first time in a decade, the 34-year-old wouldn't be pastoring a congregation on Christmas Eve.</p> <p>"I miss doing that with my people," she said. Her fiance put his hand on her back as their Christmas tree twinkled behind them.</p> <p>Aldape is part of an exodus of clergy who have left ministry in the past couple years because of a powerful combination of pandemic demands and political stress. Amid fights about masks and vaccine mandates, to how far religious leaders can go in expressing political views that might alienate some of their followers, to whether Zoom creates or stifles spiritual community, pastoral burnout has been high.</p> <p>The past few years have jostled and rocked the labor market overall, with many millions losing and changing jobs either by force, by choice or a combination of the two. But some research and anecdotes suggest this period is a crisis for American clergy.</p> <p>A Barna survey of Protestant pastors published last month found 38 percent said they'd considered quitting full-time ministry in the past year.</p> <p>Matthew Manion, director of the Center for Church Management at Villanova University, which was founded to help Catholic parishes, said he doesn't know if priest exits are rising, "but stress levels are through the roof." Diocesan leaders say there is an increase in requests for emotional and mental support to deal with the pandemic, racial awakening and political polarization, he said.</p> <p>"Clergy are meant to be there for all their people — so if their people are having more challenges, more stress — and what's made it particularly challenging is they can't be together in their normal ways of being together. Spiritual counseling and being present for people is very, very difficult," he said.</p>

Tom Knoll had led First Trinity Lutheran Church in downtown D.C. for 37 years when the pandemic hit. At first Knoll, whose career has focused on the poor and homeless, revved up. The church started live-streaming services on Facebook, worshiped and did Bible classes on Zoom. They hired staff to create YouTube videos including cartoons for children.

Then many younger members left D.C. and stopped coming virtually. Knoll, 66, began to question his usefulness. He saw people suffering and felt he couldn't help them. For people with mental and intellectual disabilities who can't use Zoom, all he could do was drop off crafts kits.

Two longtime parishioners moved into assisted living and he couldn't help. When he finally could visit them, months later, he had to stay eight feet away from them, masked, and the older men couldn't hear.

"That weighed on me over the course of the year," he said.

Knoll looked at younger pastors at other churches who were doing more with technology. They had multiple cameras around the church and better microphones.

"I felt, I'm just not doing what I should be doing. I know that's not true, I'm trying my best. But for those who really care for their people, you feel: What other things could I do?" he said. "You did kind of question: Why is this all happening?"

Knoll decided to retire several years earlier than he'd planned, and his final service was last Christmas Eve, when he stood alone in a darkened sanctuary, preaching to his congregation for a final time over Zoom.

"It was very, very sad, and very, very weird," he said.

Friday he was with his wife, son and his son's fiancée at their retirement home on a pond that spills into the Chesapeake Bay. He spent the morning answering emails and working on a puzzle. He had been planning to drive to D.C. for Christmas Eve services at his old church, but those were canceled because of worries about the new omicron variant of the coronavirus.

Knoll still does a lot of service, coordinating a group of Lutheran pastors doing a program on anti-racism and managing some affordable housing properties for the church. The unexpected slip into retirement and fewer demands feels easier, in a way, but the way it happened — at the hands of the pandemic — is also disconcerting and disorienting.

"Even though I was of retirement age, you feel you're letting people down," he said. "It's a kind of loneliness. Like you're not making a difference."

Joel Gustafson was at the start of his career when the pandemic hit. He had recently started working as a worship leader and youth pastor at a church in his hometown of Grand Rapids, Mich., and was planning to make a career of ministry. Soon he was struggling with the segment of his 100-person church that saw mask-wearing as an issue of individual rights and refused to wear them.

Gustafson found himself at odds with higher-ranking clergy.

"I felt like, if people care more about their individual rights than caring for their neighbor, then it's a matter of discipleship," he recalled. He was told to "focus on Jesus," he says. Then came fall 2020, and President Donald Trump's comment in a presidential debate to right-wing extremists that they should "stand back and stand by."

Gustafson posted to his Facebook page that he was disappointed in Trump.

Soon, he said, he was getting pushback from some congregants and clergy. One told him, he said, that half the church members were Trump voters and that his problem was that he didn't love them.



	<p>He put in his notice at the end of 2020 and left in March.</p> <p>Since then he joined his fiancée's church and is grateful leadership is encouraging of vaccines and what Gustafson sees as an active way to love one's neighbors. He also reconsidered the ministry career path and is now working for a nonprofit with youth in the judicial system.</p> <p>"I think I would have wound up leaving, but covid and a lot of stress exacerbated things and accelerated the timeline," he said.</p> <p>Aldape's exit in March from First Baptist Church, near Logan Circle, has left her torn and working hard in therapy to figure out what ministry means for her. Most Latino churches don't have female clergy, and she was raised in mostly White Protestant churches. To her, many of the latter aren't serious about confronting white supremacy. That was part of why she left there.</p> <p>Christmas Eve, after work, she planned to go to her fiancé's relatives for dinner.</p> <p>"Now I'm asking myself: What's next? What does this next season look like?" she said. "I don't think I'll be working in a church any time soon."</p>
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HEADLINE	<b>12/24 Signs that omicron surge can be avoided?</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2021/12/24/denmark-coronavirus-omicron-variant/">https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2021/12/24/denmark-coronavirus-omicron-variant/</a>
GIST	<p>Early benchmarks from Denmark on infections and hospitalizations are providing grounds for guarded optimism that highly vaccinated countries might be able to weather the omicron wave.</p> <p>The developments, coupled with Denmark's speedy rollout of booster shots, have raised hopes the country can avoid the dire <a href="#">coronavirus</a> surge for which it has <a href="#">been bracing</a>.</p> <p>"It's too early to relax, but it's encouraging that we are not following the worst-case scenario," said Tyra Grove Krause, the chief epidemiologist at Denmark's State Serum Institute.</p> <p>Denmark's detailed, nationwide program for coronavirus testing and analysis gives its scientists a trove of real-time data about the pandemic. Because of that — and because it was one of the first countries outside of Africa to witness omicron's explosive potential — it has turned into a European bellwether for what to expect with the omicron variant.</p> <p>Over the past week, the country has fared better than it was expecting. After surging to record-breaking levels, the number of daily cases has stabilized. Officials recorded <a href="#">12,500 cases</a> on Thursday, compared with 11,000 late last week.</p> <p>More important, hospitalizations have come in — so far — on the very low end of what was projected. A week ago, Denmark's government science institute said daily new coronavirus hospital admissions could range between 120 and 250 patients by Christmas Eve. In recent days, daily admissions have hung around 125.</p> <p>"That is quite promising," Grove Krause said.</p> <p>The early signals from Denmark don't provide any direct measure on the severity of the variant, one of the key questions in this phase of the pandemic. But they track with other emerging data and studies from <a href="#">Britain</a> and <a href="#">South Africa</a> that suggest omicron is less likely to lead to hospitalization than the delta variant.</p>

Scientists caution that there are still many uncertainties, and that even if omicron is less likely to cause hospitalization, its increased transmissibility means countless sicknesses and disruptions. The virus could also spread so widely that it nonetheless leads to an influx at hospitals.

Concerns remain about the health system in Denmark, Grove Krause said, because omicron infections are disproportionately concentrated among the young. For now, Grove Krause said, temporary school closures and social precautions have helped slow the spread — but the country could see a spike after holiday gatherings that bring together the young and old.

Even as cases have slowed, there are other signs of omicron's potential to cause chaos. Over the past two weeks, the number of cases among health-care workers has more than doubled. A weekly government monitoring report said there had been two omicron outbreaks in nursing homes.

Since omicron emerged in November, scientists have been racing to understand its implications and make sense of a variant that's moving far more quickly than its predecessors.

A few data points emerged this week, with one Scottish study suggesting the risk of hospitalization was almost 60 percent less with omicron than delta. Another analysis, conducted by Imperial College London, said people with omicron cases were 20 percent less likely to go to the hospital and 40 percent less likely to be hospitalized overnight.

And South Africa, the epicenter of the first apparent outbreak, has seen much lower hospitalization rates than in other waves.

It remains unclear whether trends from South Africa — where demographics skew younger — will play out in other parts of the world. It's also unclear whether and to what extent omicron's reduced severity is a feature of the virus itself, or rather a sign of population-level immunity stemming from vaccinations and past infections.

Compared with delta, omicron is far better at evading vaccines and causing infections in those who have been inoculated. But Denmark's experience shows that a rapid booster rollout might be able to help cut down rising infection numbers. A team of scientists at the State Serum Institute said in a [research paper](#) this week that Pfizer-BioNTech booster shots appeared to provide a 55 percent protection against infections, compared with cases in those who had received two doses.

Even if that level of protection dips over time, boosters “can help us through the next months,” Grove Krause said.

According to Our World in Data, Denmark has issued the most per capita booster shots of any European Union country. Denmark said in its latest monitoring report, released Thursday, that 36.8 percent of its population had been boosted, more than double the level from two weeks earlier. Overall, 77.2 percent of the country's population has received at least two doses.

Denmark carefully tracks hospitalization rates, comparing cases for delta and omicron. Between Nov. 22 and Dec. 17, the hospitalization rate was higher for delta cases: 1 percent, compared with 0.6 percent. The hospitalization numbers include those who tested positive before arriving and those who tested positive within 48 hours after admittance.

But for now, because the omicron cases are skewed among the young, scientists say an outright comparison is premature.

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HEADLINE	12/25 Another Christmas in ICUs: death, distress
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.nytimes.com/2021/12/25/us/another-christmas-of-death-and-distress-in-americas-ic-us.html">https://www.nytimes.com/2021/12/25/us/another-christmas-of-death-and-distress-in-americas-ic-us.html</a>

INDIANAPOLIS — Of all the Covid patients that Ronda Stevenson is treating over Christmas, there's one she cannot stop thinking about. He has been hospitalized for 10 months, and in all that time his 7-year-old daughter has never once been allowed to visit, prohibited from the hospital by age restrictions that keep families separated. Situations like this are bringing even veteran health care workers to tears.

Ms. Stevenson, an intensive care unit nurse at Eskenazi Health in Indianapolis for the past seven years, cries as she talks about her patients and their families, making clear the grinding toll of the pandemic on already exhausted hospital work forces.

"We're pretty short-staffed," Ms. Stevenson said. She added: "It's getting harder."

Instead of taking holiday vacations this weekend, workers at strained hospitals across the nation are working 16-hour shifts. Some have been on the job every day for weeks. Festive meals have been replaced with protein bars and sports drinks.

This Christmas weekend, with the United States facing another surge of illness stoked by a proportion of the population that remains unvaccinated, frontline workers are again sacrificing time at home with family to tend to Covid patients. In Indiana, which has among the highest rates of hospitalization and lowest rates of vaccination in the country, the situation is especially acute.

"A lot of people, including myself, had scheduled time off but are now being asked to come in and pick up shifts to cover for one another and meet the increased demands of patient care," said Dr. Graham Carlos, the executive medical director at Eskenazi, which is at capacity and has had a backlog of patients in the emergency room.

He worries that it will only get worse. "If the numbers continue as they are, a tidal wave of infections is going to hit hospital systems, putting us in dire straits," he said.

Nearly two years into a pandemic that shows no sign of abating, doctors, nurses and other frontline workers have already faced the emotional toll of mass death in their hospitals. They have endured the frustration of pleading with the public to take precautions only to watch outbreaks unfold as people ignored the call for help. They have suffered the moral distress of not being able to give patients the ideal level of care.

But this season, there is a new strain on the system: Many workers who persisted through the first year of the pandemic have departed jobs because of burnout and anxiety. And with the Omicron variant pushing case numbers up dramatically, the caregivers who remain are getting infections, too, straining staff levels in unpredictable ways.

"This is the worst I've ever seen it," said Maureen May, a nurse with 37 years of experience who serves as president of the Pennsylvania Association of Staff Nurses and Allied Professionals. She canceled her own holiday plans to pick up a shift on Christmas Day so that a co-worker could have time away.

Facing urgent concerns about hospital staffing shortages, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention this week shortened the isolation periods for infected health care workers, allowing them to return to the job in seven days, instead of 10. President Biden also said that 1,000 military doctors, nurses, paramedics and other medical personnel would be deployed to shore up staffing levels at hospitals in the coming weeks.

At IU Health Methodist Hospital in Indianapolis, the National Guard has been helping with tasks such as transporting patients and cleaning. Now, a 20-person Navy team is arriving to help supplement the medical staff, which is depleted in part because about 350 workers across the broader hospital system are out with Covid or because they have been exposed to the virus.

The hospital's staffing shortage comes during a crush of patients that has forced the hospital to open up units that haven't been used in years. Patients across the hospital system are being cared for in nontraditional spaces, while others are waiting in the emergency room for rooms to become available.

"In my career, I've never seen the E.R. as busy or full as in the last month or two," said Dr. Mark Luetkemeyer, the chief medical officer for IU Health's adult academic health center.

The strain has hit all corners of the hospital. Todd Walroth, the pharmacy manager for clinical services and a critical care pharmacist at Eskenazi Health, describes long days, including some 18-hour shifts. His family sometimes eats dinner at 10 p.m. — with his young children up past midnight and then sleeping late into the morning — so he's able to spend time with them.

His team is challenged not just by staffing shortages but by scarcity of medication. "We've had some really, really tough days trying to make sure, for example, that our patients that are on a ventilator still have pain meds and sedatives and that they're comfortable and calm and their pain is controlled," he said.

Across the nation, there are about 70,000 people hospitalized with Covid, up about 50 percent from early November. Health experts fear hospitalizations could increase with the rapidly spreading Omicron variant.

At Eskenazi Health, the critical Covid patients in the I.C.U. are those who have not gotten the vaccine, Ms. Stevenson said. Across Indiana, just 52 percent of the population is fully vaccinated.

She herself had been wary of getting the vaccine and didn't do so until she was required to for her job. Since then, she has grown thankful for it, as she watches so many unvaccinated patients roll into the I.C.U.

"We hear a lot of 'Oh, yes, I should have gotten the vaccine,'" she said.

Government and medical leaders have pleaded with the public to get vaccinated to limit the spread and damage of the virus.

The Omicron variant has spread rapidly throughout the country in recent days even as hospitals have been struggling to manage the effects of the Delta variant that was previously the most dominant strain. While the latest surge and emergence of Omicron have led some cities and states to reimpose a few virus restrictions in recent weeks, much of the country continues to live close to normal, raising fears that Christmas and New Year's gatherings will fuel further spread.

With the burden on hospitals potentially growing, there is also fear that the pandemic's relentless toll on medical workers will bring fundamental challenges that could linger well beyond the pandemic. Surveys have detailed widespread burnout among workers, and a study this month found that the impact of that burnout is just starting to unfold, with 20 percent of physicians and 40 percent of nurses reporting that they intend to leave their jobs.

Those who are still working are figuring out how to cope.

Dr. Carlos said that recently, after working for three weeks straight in the I.C.U., he was asked to pick up a Saturday shift at a large hospital in Indianapolis. He had promised to do some Christmas shopping with his eldest daughter that day. And at home, the gutters needed cleaning.

Dr. Carlos ended up declining the shift. But as he was Christmas shopping, he was consumed with guilt that his decision was causing more work for his colleagues. That feeling ruined the time away.

"I hate that feeling," Dr. Carlos said. "When I'm at work until 9 o'clock, I feel guilty for not being at home. And when I take a day off, I feel guilty for not being here."

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SOURCE	<a href="https://www.nytimes.com/2021/12/25/us/as-omicron-spreads-and-cases-soar-the-unvaccinated-remain-defiant.html">https://www.nytimes.com/2021/12/25/us/as-omicron-spreads-and-cases-soar-the-unvaccinated-remain-defiant.html</a>
GIST	<p>CLEVELAND — As a fast-spreading new strain of the coronavirus swarms across the country, hospitals in Ohio running low on beds and staff recently took out a full-page newspaper advertisement pleading with unvaccinated Americans to finally get the shot. It read, simply: <a href="#">“Help.”</a></p> <p>But in a suburban Ohio café, Jackie Rogers, 58, an accountant, offered an equally succinct response on behalf of unvaccinated America: “Never.”</p> <p>In the year since the first shots began going into arms, opposition to vaccines has hardened from skepticism and wariness into something approaching an article of faith for the approximately 39 million American adults who have yet to get a single dose.</p> <p>Now, health experts say the roughly 15 percent of the adult population that remains stubbornly unvaccinated is at the greatest risk of severe illness and death from the Omicron variant, and could overwhelm hospitals that are already brimming with Covid patients. In Cleveland, where Omicron cases are soaring, a hospital unit at the Cleveland Clinic that provides life support to the sickest patients is already completely full.</p> <p>Compounding the problem, the pace of first-time vaccinations <a href="#">appears to be plateauing this month</a>, even as Omicron takes hold, and the numbers of children getting vaccinated and eligible adults getting booster shots are lower than some health experts hoped. Around 20 percent of children 5 to 11 years old have gotten a dose of vaccine. And only around one in three fully vaccinated Americans has gotten a booster.</p> <p>It is still too early to know whether spiking numbers of Omicron infections in New York, the rest of the Northeast and the Midwest will be followed by a surge in hospitalizations and deaths. Early studies suggest the new variant may cause less severe illness than previous variants did.</p> <p>But so far, the threat of Omicron is doing little to change people’s minds. Nearly 90 percent of unvaccinated adults said the variant would not spur them to get shots, according to a recent survey from the Kaiser Family Foundation.</p> <p>And some of the unvaccinated said that Omicron’s wily ability to infect vaccinated people only reaffirmed their decision to not get the shot. Others say the virus’s changing nature has stiffened their resolve not to get it.</p> <p>“It’s just another variant,” said Dianne Putnam, an unvaccinated resident of Dalton, Ga., and president of her county’s Republican Party, who spent six days in the hospital this summer after contracting Covid-19. “Next year there’ll be another one. I mean, there’s going to always be different variants.”</p> <p>Public-health campaigns and employee vaccine mandates have made progress since the summer at reducing the ranks of unvaccinated fence-sitters, people without easy access to health care and those who were hesitant but persuadable.</p> <p>The remaining ranks of unvaccinated Americans steadfastly opposed to getting a shot tend to be younger, whiter and more Republican than those who have received the vaccine or are still considering one, surveys have shown.</p> <p>At least six million first doses have been given in December since Omicron was first detected in the United States. But those numbers come with a caveat: Boosters can sometimes be misclassified as first doses, potentially leading to an overcount of how many Americans are getting their first shots, the C.D.C. has warned.</p> <p>Booster shots, now the preoccupation of many state and federal health officials, have made up a greater portion of the roughly 1.5 million doses administered each day around the country in recent weeks. The rate of first doses given was similarly sluggish in the late summer, when roughly 300,000 were given each</p>

day, dropping even more before regulators authorized the Pfizer-BioNTech shot for young children in October, when the rate of first doses began climbing again.

The number of adults vaccinated has steadily improved since six months ago, when roughly 170 million had received a first shot, compared with around 220 million on Saturday, an increase driven in part by mandates.

Low vaccination rates are still heavily concentrated in rural areas and the South, with Louisiana, Mississippi, Georgia, Arkansas and Alabama near the bottom. Those states have recorded around half of their population as fully vaccinated, well below the national rate of about 62 percent.

In interviews across the country, unvaccinated people said they had grown inured to public-health messages from exhausted doctors and nurses and even pleas from their own families, as vaccinations have become entangled in the country's politics. Even though mandates have been shown to significantly improve vaccination rates in places and at companies that implement them, they said they were dead-set against President Biden's efforts and had tuned out his appeals for Americans to get vaccinated as a patriotic duty.

"The nail in the coffin was when they said you had to get the vaccine. It definitely turned me away," said Cyrarra Bricker, 26, a sales representative in Fort Worth, Texas.

The United States continues to see [a stark partisan divide](#) in vaccination rates, with more than 91 percent of adult Democrats receiving at least one shot, compared with about 60 percent of adult Republicans.

Over the past week, former President Donald J. Trump made two full-throated endorsements of vaccines that many of his supporters have rejected, drawing praise from Mr. Biden.

At [an event in Dallas](#) last Sunday, he argued that a shot in the arm was a way to help demonstrate that the three vaccines, which were developed while he was in office, were one of his great successes. Mr. Trump also promoted the vaccines in [a video interview](#) released this week by The Daily Wire, a conservative media site, while also rejecting the idea of mandates.

"Forget about the mandates, people have to have their freedom," Mr. Trump said. "But at the same time, the vaccine is one of the greatest achievements of mankind."

Still, many members of right-wing media continue to spout anti-vaccine rhetoric and disinformation, dissuading many from getting the shot.

At the same time, Republican governors and attorneys general are fighting to block the administration's vaccine mandates for federal contractors, health care workers and Head Start programs. Anti-vaccine activists have applauded moves by Gov. Ron DeSantis of Florida and Gov. Greg Abbott of Texas, both Republicans, to thwart vaccine requirements by [schools](#) or [private businesses](#).

Dr. José R. Romero, the Arkansas health secretary, said his state's vaccination rate, which is hardly budging, reflected how deep the opposition to the shot was among those left to convince.

"Unfortunately, we can't say that we've identified a single thing that has really moved the needle in any great extent," Dr. Romero said. "It's just a slow chipping away at this. It's sort of a mouse eating the elephant one bit at a time. And you just keep going."

In Washington, as the Supreme Court is [set to hear](#) challenges to the Biden administration's vaccine mandates, White House officials see few remaining policy levers to pull. Domestic airline passenger vaccination requirements are one of the few tools still at President Biden's disposal that could meaningfully increase the ranks of the vaccinated. But the administration does not have plans to enact them for now, senior officials said.



“Pure persuasion? I think we’ve sort of run out of options,” Dr. Anthony S. Fauci, Mr. Biden’s chief medical adviser, said. There were still glimmers of hope, he added. Some people fearful of Omicron would take the leap. And unvaccinated Americans, he said, were still not a one-dimensional group. Some might need to just see more safety data, he said.

Like some other public health experts, Dr. Fauci said that a uniform federal vaccine passport system could be another resource. If more businesses and organizations asked for passports under that kind of program, he said, “a lot of people are going to realize that it’s so inconvenient not to be vaccinated, that they might as well go ahead.”

But unvaccinated people like Eric Dilts, 45, a DoorDash delivery worker in St. Joseph, Mo., said he felt like the imperfect nature of the vaccines and shifting messages from public officials about boosters and breakthrough infections had validated his skepticism.

“Now you need a first shot and second shot, and now they’re talking about all these boosters,” he said. “How many shots do you need? It seems like a joke to me.”

Unvaccinated Americans this year have made up the vast majority of severe cases and deaths from the virus, and health experts say getting vaccinated remains the best way to protect against severe illness and death. The unvaccinated are “much more likely to be in a hospital, and they’re much more likely to be taking up a bed that might be wanted” this winter, said Bill Hanage, an epidemiologist at the Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health.

Instead, many of the unvaccinated have placed their faith in “natural immunity” in weathering Covid-19 so far, despite warnings from infectious disease experts that the body’s protections are not sufficient to ward off re-infection.

In Los Angeles, Marie Elena Rigo, 51, who contracted Covid in January, said she felt protected after testing for antibodies and was more skeptical of the vaccine after a flurry of recent breakthrough infections among friends and family. Her 11-year-old son tested positive on Wednesday.

“He coughed on me last night when I hugged him,” she said. “I don’t feel scared. I never was scared.”

Dr. Luciana Borio, a former chief scientist at the Food and Drug Administration who advised Mr. Biden during the transition, said reaching the unvaccinated was now arguably “the hardest aspect” of the U.S. response — one that would require a change of course in federal and state priorities, such as reopening community vaccine sites or urging providers to put more focus back on first doses.

A spokeswoman for the Department of Health and Human Services pointed to a wide-ranging vaccine public education campaign still underway at the agency, with special attention now to reaching young children and those in need of a booster. New ads this week targeting rural, younger Americans featured the language: “When you’re done with Covid, it doesn’t mean it’s done with you.” Other ads targeting rural adults warned of the financial costs of contracting the virus.

In Cleveland, the Covid picture is one of the bleakest in the country. Intensive care units are crammed with patients with the Delta variant, with a surge of new Omicron infections looming. New infections in Cuyahoga County, which includes Cleveland, [have grown by 234 percent](#) in the past two weeks.

Ohio, where 60 percent of people have gotten at least one shot, now has the country’s [highest rate of Covid-19 hospitalization](#), and doctors say emergency rooms and I.C.U.s are running out of beds. They are being forced to call people in from holiday vacations as growing breakthrough infections whittle away at their staff levels.

There was just a single open bed in a sixth-floor intensive care unit at the main campus of the Cleveland Clinic on Thursday morning, where about 90 percent of I.C.U. patients were unvaccinated. The demand

	<p>for intensive care has gotten so great that when a bed opens up, nurses are cleaning rooms and moving patients themselves to make space for the next patient.</p> <p>“It feels like it will never end,” said Claire Strauser, a nurse manager in the intensive care unit whose adult son still has refused her entreaties to get vaccinated. Ms. Strauser said she will probably not see him not over Christmas to reduce her own chances of getting infected and sidelined from a job she is devoted to.</p> <p>“I don’t know what can change,” she said. “They’re just dug in.”</p>
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HEADLINE	<b>12/24 Hindu extremists call for killing of Muslims</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.nytimes.com/2021/12/24/world/asia/hindu-extremists-india-muslims.html">https://www.nytimes.com/2021/12/24/world/asia/hindu-extremists-india-muslims.html</a>
GIST	<p>Hundreds of right-wing Hindu activists and monks rose in unison at a conference this week to take an oath: They would turn India, constitutionally a secular republic, into a Hindu nation, even if doing so required dying and killing.</p> <p>“If 100 of us are ready to kill two million of them, then we will win and make India a Hindu nation,” said <a href="#">Pooja Shakun Pandey</a>, a leader of Hindu Mahasabha, a group that <a href="#">espouses militant Hindu nationalism</a>, referring to the country’s Muslims. “Be ready to kill and go to jail.”</p> <p>Even by the standards of the rising anti-Muslim fury in India, the three-day conference in the city of Haridwar, 150 miles north of New Delhi, produced the most blatant and alarming call for violence in recent years.</p> <p>The crowded auditorium, where right-wing Hindu monks called for other Hindus to arm themselves and kill Muslims, included influential religious leaders with close ties to Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s governing party, and even some members of the party.</p> <p>Videos of the event have spread widely on social media in India this week. Yet Mr. Modi has maintained a characteristic silence that analysts say can be interpreted by his most extreme supporters as a tacit signal of protection.</p> <p>The police, who <a href="#">readily jail rights activists</a> and comedians <a href="#">on charges lacking evidence</a>, have been slow to take action. Even opposition political groups have been restrained in their response, an indication of the degree to which right-wing Hindu nationalism has gripped the country since Mr. Modi came to office in 2014.</p> <p>The inflammatory remarks come as some states governed by Mr. Modi’s Bharatiya Janata Party, or B.J.P., are holding elections, including in Uttar Pradesh and Uttarakhand, where the conference was held. Mr. Modi was busy campaigning this week in Uttar Pradesh for Yogi Adityanath, his hard-line protégé and the state’s chief minister, who has frequently fanned anti-Muslim hatred.</p> <p>Multiple episodes of violence against Muslims have been reported during election season, including attacks by mobs trying to close businesses owned by Muslims.</p> <p>“There are virtually only a handful of political leaders left who even mention the need to preserve India’s secularism,” said Gilles Verniers, a professor of political science at Ashoka University near New Delhi. “The B.J.P. may face increasing political challenges, but it has won its cultural war, with lasting effects on India’s democracy, and on India’s largest minority.”</p> <p>Right-wing Hindu nationalists have preached violence online for years, but the violence has recently spilled onto the streets. Muslim fruit sellers have been beaten and their earnings snatched away after being accused of luring Hindu women into marriage to convert them. Muslim activists have been threatened with prosecution under an antiterrorism law that has been scrutinized by courts.</p>

In recent months, Hindu nationalists in Gurugram, a major technology center about 15 miles south of New Delhi, have confronted Muslims during Friday Prayer. Bands of right-wing Hindus have interrupted prayers with chants of “Jai Shri Ram!” Meaning “Hail Lord Ram,” a major Hindu god, the chant has become a battle cry for Hindu nationalists.

“We are fast losing everything in this country, including the right to worship,” said Niyaz Farooqi, a Muslim who works in an automobile showroom in Gurugram. “A right given to us by the Constitution of this country.”

On Friday, four days after the conference ended, and after the videos circulated widely, the police in Uttarakhand announced that they had opened an investigation but that no arrests had been made. Officials said they have registered a case against organizers of the conference for promoting “enmity between different groups on grounds of religion,” which can mean a jail term of five years.

“We will do the investigation as per law and such types of incidents will not be tolerated,” said Ashok Kumar, a top police officer in the state of Uttarakhand.

During the conference, Swami Prabodhanand Giri, head of a right-wing Hindu organization in Uttarakhand, said the country now belongs to Hindus.

“This is why, like in Myanmar, the police here, the politicians here, the army and every Hindu must pick up weapons, and we will have to conduct this cleanliness drive,” he said while referring to Muslims. “There is no solution apart from this.”

Mr. Prabodhanand’s aides declined to comment for this article.

Videos from the conference also showed Suresh Chavhanke, who heads a news channel, administering an oath to turn India into a Hindu-first country.

“We make a resolution until our last breath: We will make India a Hindu nation, and keep it a Hindu-only nation,” he said. “We will fight and die if required, we will kill as well.” He then [tweeted a video](#) of the oath to his half a million followers.

Political observers say the government is allowing hate speech of this kind by remaining silent in the face of calls for violence, a silence underscored by the meekness of the political opposition.

Nilanjan Mukhopadhyay, a biographer of Mr. Modi who has written extensively on the rise of the Hindu right, said the B.J.P.’s earlier leaders thought they could use Hindu nationalism to mobilize constituencies but then contain the ideology. That calculation backfired in 1992, when Hindu activists demolished a major mosque.

Many earlier B.J.P. leaders expressed regrets about the episode, but Mr. Modi has no such qualms, Mr. Mukhopadhyay said at a recent book event.

“They thought they were going to ride the tiger, easily tame it and get down. But you can’t easily tame a tiger. If you ride the tiger, you have to decide that at some point the tiger is going to eat,” he said. “Modi decided to allow the tiger to eat sometimes and lead the tiger when he wants to.”

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HEADLINE	12/24 How long should sick workers isolate?
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.nytimes.com/2021/12/24/business/workers-covid-isolate.html?action=click&amp;module=Well&amp;pgtype=Homepage&amp;section=Business">https://www.nytimes.com/2021/12/24/business/workers-covid-isolate.html?action=click&amp;module=Well&amp;pgtype=Homepage&amp;section=Business</a>
GIST	Barbara Sibley’s four New York restaurants had already weathered the city’s initial Covid-19 wave, the prevaccine surge last winter and this summer’s Delta spike when last weekend it finally happened: Fearing

an outbreak and struggling with staffing after one of her workers got sick with Covid, she temporarily shut down one of her locations.

That was only the start of Ms. Sibley's worries. She also had to weigh how long the employee, who was fully vaccinated, should isolate before returning to the job. And the messaging from public health experts was not clear-cut.

In the early days of the pandemic the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention recommended that most people who tested positive for the coronavirus isolate for 14 days. It later [reduced its recommended isolation period to 10 days](#). But these policies were based on data from unvaccinated individuals and were implemented before the widespread availability of rapid tests. An increasing number of health and policy professionals now suggest that vaccinated people can end their isolation after five to seven days, so long as they are not symptomatic and they test negative.

On Thursday, the C.D.C. reduced, in some circumstances, the number of days it recommends that health care workers who test positive for the coronavirus isolate themselves, but it did not address other businesses.

"Every expert has been calling for shorter isolation times, so it's a good move, but it's shortsighted not to apply this more broadly: schools, colleges, sports, Broadway, restaurants, airlines," said Joseph Allen, an associate professor at the T.H. Chan School of Public Health at Harvard University. "All are facing this same problem with having to isolate people for extended periods without the option to 'test to return.'"

The C.D.C. said Thursday that it "continues to evaluate isolation and quarantine recommendations for the broader population" as it learns about the Omicron variant of the coronavirus and "will update the public as appropriate."

In New York, Gov. Kathy Hochul [said on Friday](#) that fully vaccinated critical workers could return to work five days after testing positive, so long as they have no symptoms or their symptoms are resolving and they have had no fever for 72 hours. Those workers will also have to wear a mask, she said.

Omicron has intensified staffing shortages across industries, and the spike in cases has disrupted travel during the holidays, stranding thousands of customers and underscoring the economic toll of employees needing to isolate. Already, some economists are warning about the potential impact that [shutdowns can have on consumer spending](#).

Delta Air Lines [asked the C.D.C. on Tuesday to cut isolation](#) time to five days for fully vaccinated people, warning that the current 10-day period may "significantly impact" operations. It was followed by JetBlue and Airlines for America, a trade group that represents eight airlines.

But the Association of Flight Attendants pushed back on that request, telling the C.D.C. on Thursday that "we support your agency's current recommendation to isolate for 10 days" and that decisions to reduce isolation times "should be made by public health professionals, not airlines."

Sara Nelson, the international president of the union, said flight attendants should not have to return to work until they were healthy — and tested negative. "We do not see the justification for reducing the number of days at this time," she wrote in a letter to the C.D.C.'s director.

Uncertainty around isolation guidelines has added to the angst that many employers are feeling.

"It's stressful because you have the responsibility to keep your guests safe, your staff and your family," Ms. Sibley said. While some companies are asking employees who test positive to isolate for 14 days, she also wants to do what makes sense for her workers.

"You can do 14 days if you're not trying to make sure 150 people survive and pay rent through your business," she said.

With scientific understanding of the coronavirus moving more quickly than public health guidelines, and with much still unknown about the Omicron variant, some business owners feel forced into playing epidemiologist.

“If I were an employer I would not go outside C.D.C. recommendations,” said Dr. Megan Ranney, an emergency physician and an associate dean at the School of Public Health at Brown University. “That’s why we need the C.D.C. to update its recommendations, if they think the science supports it.”

Requirements for longer isolation periods could also create disincentives for people to get tested, according to Dr. Ashish Jha, dean of Brown’s School of Public Health. “There are going to be a lot of people who are, if they have mild symptoms, are going to not test or not report because it’s really substantial to be out for 10 days,” he said.

Diana Mora, the owner of Friends and Lovers, a bar in Brooklyn with just over a dozen employees, said trying to follow public health guidelines while keeping her business running was a constant source of worry.

“We’re so small we don’t really have enough staff to tell everyone to stay home,” she said, though the bar has been following the C.D.C.’s 10-day guideline. “If there’s more than two people who are exposed and have to isolate, we’re stuck in a lurch.”

Managing the budget is also a concern. “Luckily for us we’re able to continue to pay people, but as this continues it gets tricky,” Ms. Mora said.

In industries where employees can work remotely, like technology, companies seem to feel little need to move faster than the C.D.C. Even employers that need large numbers of workers on site, like Target, Kroger and DoorDash, say they continue to follow the agency’s recommendations.

The National Football League now allows vaccinated players who test positive to come back the next day provided they test negative twice. It also [eliminated weekly testing for vaccinated players](#) who are asymptomatic, with its chief medical officer saying the pandemic had reached a stage in which it’s unnecessary for vaccinated players to sit out if they feel healthy.

Calls to reduce the isolation period could grow if infections spike as expected through the holidays. Already, Broadway shows have [canceled performances through Christmas](#). CityMD, the privately owned urgent care clinic, [temporarily shut](#) 19 sites in New York and New Jersey because of staffing shortages. At least a dozen New York restaurants have [temporarily closed](#) in response to positive tests.

“I think lots of companies are looking at a lot of disruption in the next month and trying to put in policies right now, because they know their employees are going to get infected in very high numbers,” said Dr. Jha.

The United States might take direction from policy shifts abroad. Britain said on Wednesday that it was reducing to seven from 10 the days that people must isolate after showing Covid-19 symptoms.

After the British government [lifted nearly all its pandemic restrictions](#) in July, hundreds of thousands of workers were pinged by the National Health Service’s track-and-trace app and told to isolate because they had been exposed to the coronavirus. Businesses complained of being short-staffed, and economists said the “pingdemic” [may have slowed economic growth in July](#).

In the United States, new tools to help manage through the pandemic are on the way.

The Food and Drug Administration this week authorized two pills to treat Covid, from Pfizer and Merck. Those treatments have been shown to stave off severe disease and have potential to reduce transmission of the virus, though supply of both pills, especially Pfizer’s, will be limited in the next few months.

President Biden said on Tuesday that he planned to invoke the Defense Production Act to buy and give away 500 million rapid antigen tests, a crucial tool in detecting transmissibility, though those tests [will not be available for weeks or longer](#).

If a combination of the antiviral pills and rapid tests is able to get individuals back to work faster, “that’s a big economic point,” said Dr. Eric Topol, a professor of molecular medicine at Scripps Research.

Still, some employers are proceeding with caution. [Molly Moon Neitzel](#), who owns an ice cream business in Seattle with just over 100 employees, said she had kept guidelines for isolation conservative.

“I’m on the side of protecting people over getting them back to work right now,” she said, adding that if it were summer and her business were busier, she might consider a shorter isolation period. “It’s the slowest time of the year for an ice cream company, so that is in my favor.”

Some public health experts worry that if the C.D.C. shortens its guidelines on isolating, employers could pressure workers to get back before they’re fully recovered.

“What I don’t want to see happen is for this to be used as an excuse to force people to come back while they are unwell,” Dr. Ranney of Brown said.

And even with clearer guidelines, putting policies in place can be tricky. While some experts suggest different isolation rules for vaccinated and unvaccinated employees, some companies do not yet have a system for tracking which of their workers have gotten a vaccine. The question of whether the C.D.C. will change its [definition of fully vaccinated to include booster shots](#) adds another layer of complexity.

It’s not just sick employees who may have to stay home: Companies are also grappling with whether vaccinated workers should quarantine after exposure to someone with Covid-19, which C.D.C. guidelines do not require.

“It becomes a challenge for employers to choose between providing a safer environment and keeping staff intact, or going with the C.D.C. guidance,” said Karen Burke, an adviser at the Society for Human Resource Management.

But almost two years into the pandemic, that’s the position that employers continue to find themselves in, amid an ever-flowing cascade of new data, guidelines and considerations.

“Every moment, you’re making life or death decisions,” Ms. Sibley said. “That’s not what we signed up for.”

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HEADLINE	<b>12/24 Quietly equipping brutal Myanmar military</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.nytimes.com/2021/12/24/world/asia/myanmar-coup-military-tatmadaw-kyaw-thaung.html?action=click&amp;module=Well&amp;pgtype=Homepage&amp;section=World%20News">https://www.nytimes.com/2021/12/24/world/asia/myanmar-coup-military-tatmadaw-kyaw-thaung.html?action=click&amp;module=Well&amp;pgtype=Homepage&amp;section=World%20News</a>
GIST	<p>Three years ago, the Kyaw Thaung family partied at the <a href="#">Pegu Club</a>. The venerable Burmese-Irish clan had restored the teak-lined establishment to its 19th-century glory, evoking the days when gin-sipping colonialists ruled. The Pegu Club project befitted the family’s East-meets-West positioning and the optimism of a country newly engaging with the world.</p> <p>Amid periodic power cuts in the rest of Yangon, the Kyaw Thaungs danced and sipped champagne among the new elite, including young entrepreneurs returned from exile, bejeweled daughters of generals, and even former political prisoners suddenly responsible for attracting foreign investment to the latest frontier market.</p>



As Myanmar's military dictators ended [decades of isolationism](#), the Kyaw Thaungs seemed to embody the perfect mix: an august family with a long history of charitable giving that was committed to the kind of business reforms needed to coax [a corrupt, closed country](#) into the global economy. But the main source of the family fortune, purported vaguely to be from property and import-export companies, was concealed behind a facade.

For all their efforts to differentiate themselves from the drug lords and business cronies who dominated Myanmar's economy, the Kyaw Thaungs were quietly equipping one of the world's most brutal militaries. Their partnership with the Tatmadaw, as the Myanmar military is known, deepened even as its generals committed [ethnic cleansing](#) against Rohingya Muslims. And it continued into this year, when the army staged a coup and [seized full power](#) of the country, killing [more than 1,300 civilians](#) so far, in the estimate of a monitoring group.

U Jonathan Kyaw Thaung, the scion, was the public face of the family. As he chased Tatmadaw contracts, he hobnobbed with the family of [Senior Gen. Min Aung Hlaing](#), the military chief who orchestrated the coup. He met with the Myanmar air force commander at the 2015 Paris Air Show, where the military leader checked out Pakistani fighter jets that ended up in the Tatmadaw's arsenal. A Kyaw Thaung family business bid to help supply the military with spare parts for Russian attack helicopters that have been used to [strafe civilian populations resistant to the coup](#).

Even the renovation of the Pegu Club depended on a deal in which the Kyaw Thaungs had to pay at least \$510,000 a year to a military conglomerate, the agreement for the club shows.

An investigation of the Kyaw Thaung family by The New York Times — based on interviews with dozens of former company employees, business associates, military insiders and family members, as well as thousands of pages of corporate filings, contracts, tenders and other financial documents — exposes a vast web of military procurement that was strategically hidden from the public. The family, best known for its charitable foundation, was profiting from its close ties to the Tatmadaw and helping the military avoid scrutiny by Western governments.

At cocktail parties and business forums, the family talked up international business standards, like rigorous governance, corporate social responsibility and open tenders. Behind closed doors, the Kyaw Thaungs, charismatic, Western-educated and English-speaking, relied on the kind of insider deal-making with the Tatmadaw that has enriched an entire class of cronies in one of Asia's poorest and most repressive nations.

Ultimately, the story of the Kyaw Thaungs parallels that of Myanmar: a country of vast potential foiled by a ruthless military and the families willing to compromise themselves in pursuit of its riches.

The Kyaw Thaungs capitalized on their family ties to secure lucrative contracts supplying the military with European aircraft and a French coastal surveillance system. They bid for a deal to provide Italian guns to the navy, according to a former company employee and an email discussing the offer. A relative, a former general who served as both energy minister and the chairman of the national investment commission, formally approved deals that Kyaw Thaung companies made with [military-linked businesses or with the military](#) itself.

To obscure the real font of their wealth, they set up a tangle of companies in jurisdictions ranging from the British Virgin Islands to Singapore. Some of these opened and closed with a single deal, and they depended on ownership structures that at times masked the involvement of family members.

Some of the family's military procurement was devised to evade [Western export controls](#) meant to prevent the Tatmadaw from strengthening its command, according to international sanctions experts and five former company employees. The coastal radar technology, for example, could have run afoul of such rules: It was operational when Rohingya Muslims tried to escape a military massacre that United Nations investigators say could constitute genocide.

One of the family's companies [donated more than \\$40,000 to the Tatmadaw](#) for what the United Nations described as a cover-up of the site of ethnic cleansing. A 2019 [U.N. report](#) on the military's persecution of the Rohingya highlighted that contribution.

In interviews, Mr. Jonathan Kyaw Thaung denied impropriety, saying his relations with the military were no more than any business operating in Myanmar. He said his relatives, his father included, did not supply military equipment to the Tatmadaw and said other families were the country's real arms dealers. He noted that his grandfather, who started the family business, stayed away from the fishery or livestock trades because those would contravene Buddhist proscriptions on taking lives.

Mr. Jonathan Kyaw Thaung, 39, said in a later interview that he was not close to his father, U Moe Kyaw Thaung, and that he was not aware of exactly what kind of businesses his father pursued. He said it was not correct to refer to a family business because of the separate companies he and his father ran. (He was a director of one of his father's companies and is currently a director at another.)

"Because of my love for my country, I came back," he said. "I didn't go and work on Wall Street. I didn't go to Los Angeles and set up a music business, like a lot of my friends. I came home. I came home not to make money but to continue the family."

### **Family ties**

The image that Mr. Jonathan Kyaw Thaung presented to the world suited the heir to one of Myanmar's grand lineages, that of a charming graduate of [Millfield](#), a British boarding school also attended by the Thai king. In 2017, he told a [journal](#) produced by the Asian Institute of Management how his grandfather had been invited to Buckingham Palace and dispensed business advice to his grandson. He was the last person to see his grandfather, U Kyaw Thaung, before he died, Mr. Jonathan Kyaw Thaung said in the article.

Little of the story was true.

He was just a toddler, hardly in need of business advice, when his grandfather died. There was no invitation to Buckingham Palace, according to four Kyaw Thaung family members who spoke with The Times. Although Mr. Jonathan Kyaw Thaung's public biography said he graduated from Babson College, he acknowledged he never completed his studies there.

"I want to set the record straight. I come from Myanmar's oldest business family," he said. "My grandfather was extremely successful. My father was extremely successful."

"I've always been someone who has achieved and been a champion, and I never took shortcuts," he added, describing his talents in track, soccer and business.

The Kyaw Thaungs grew up as part of a comfortable, well-connected set that was protected as Myanmar's generals turned the country inward.

The family's initial fortune came from jute, a natural fiber that is used to make rope and twine. The jute mill was nationalized during the military's disastrous venture into socialism, after its first coup in 1962.

Burma, once lauded for its fine schools and polyglot cosmopolitanism, sank into penury. The ruling junta renamed the country Myanmar.

Mr. Jonathan Kyaw Thaung's father was sent to Northern Ireland, where he escaped Myanmar's privations. His siblings scattered to Thailand, Singapore, the United States and Britain. The family's graceful villa in Yangon moldered, as did the rest of the country.

But even as many of them headed abroad, the family remained connected to Myanmar and traveled there to do business. Their path back was eased by the extended family tree, which included high-ranking Tatmadaw officers, cabinet ministers and confidants of junta chiefs.

A cousin married U Zeyar Aung, an urbane, English-speaking general who led the Northern Command and the 88th Light Infantry Division, both of which the United Nations has tied to decades of war crimes against Myanmar's own people. He later was the railway minister, then the energy minister and subsequently led the national investment commission, over the time the Kyaw Thaungs were vying for military contracts.

Myanmar's patronage networks are a tangle of roots that bind family trees. Generals' children tend to marry within tight circles, perhaps to other military progeny or the offspring of business cronies.

As the Tatmadaw began loosening control over the economy, engaging in a fire sale of assets that had once been the military's fief, that elite class of the well-connected swooped in to profit. Mr. Jonathan Kyaw Thaung, whose mother is Irish, returned to Myanmar, along with siblings and cousins who had also been raised overseas.

It was a path previously traveled by his father, among the earliest businessmen to return to military-ruled Myanmar after time in Northern Ireland and in Singapore. Although he told others that the family business relied on the import-export trade, his father, Mr. Moe Kyaw Thaung, was burnishing his Tatmadaw ties by acting as a cross-cultural middleman for the generals, seven business associates, military insiders and family members said. He boasted of arranging the overseas study of the progeny of Senior Gen. Than Shwe, the former junta chief, according to five of those people. Mr. Moe Kyaw Thaung did not respond to requests for comment.

Despite the family's lack of media visibility, a few details emerged. In 2002, a Tatmadaw-run newspaper reported that Mr. Jonathan Kyaw Thaung and his father had donated 7 million kyat, a significant amount at that time, during a military "cash-presentation" ceremony for the reconstruction of a Buddhist temple.

The family continued financial and other support of the Tatmadaw even when its soldiers were being accused of genocide in 2017. This deadly campaign against the Rohingya accelerated as the military began sharing power with a civilian government, soiling the feel-good narrative of a rare bloodless political transition.

The KT Group, Mr. Jonathan Kyaw Thaung's conglomerate, donated money for the reconstruction of lands where the Muslim minority had previously lived.

"Officials of these companies should be investigated with a view to criminal prosecution for making substantial and direct contributions to the commission of crimes under international law, including crimes against humanity," said Chris Sidoti, a U.N. investigator who worked on the 2019 report.

In September 2017, with the violence against the Rohingya provoking international alarm, Ky-Tha, Mr. Moe Kyaw Thaung's business group, arranged a meeting between a representative of Safran, a Paris-based aviation and defense manufacturer, and top officers of the Myanmar Air Force, according to a leaked document provided by [Justice For Myanmar](#), a watchdog group that investigates Tatmadaw business dealings. The meeting centered on Tatmadaw helicopters, including the Russian-made MI-17, a gunship deployed against the Rohingya and other ethnic minorities.

Safran declined to comment. It is unclear whether the discussions led to a servicing deal. Mr. Jonathan Kyaw Thaung said he had never heard of Safran.

Beyond his family connections, Mr. Jonathan Kyaw Thaung also cultivated a relationship with one of Myanmar's most influential cronies, U Aung Ko Win, the founder of the conglomerate Kanbawza. KBZ, as the company is known, has been involved in most every major business in Myanmar, including banking, aviation, construction and mining. Mr. Aung Ko Win was the target of European Union sanctions for his ties to the military regime.

His backing allowed Mr. Jonathan Kyaw Thaung to land meetings with military bigwigs, four former employees said. He lent his influence and cash to Mr. Jonathan Kyaw Thaung, helping him form an oil and gas company, bid for a telecom license and obscure the purchase of aircraft for the Tatmadaw.

Soon, Mr. Jonathan Kyaw Thaung was socializing with General Min Aung Hlaing, the army chief, and his children, according to 11 former employees, relatives, business associates and military insiders. Kyaw Thaung family members accompanied General Min Aung Hlaing and other generals to a regional defense summit and air show in Malaysia, two people who participated in the journey said.

Mr. Jonathan Kyaw Thaung says that his relationship with members of General Min Aung Hlaing's family has soured. He said he had cultivated ties with the military chief himself. He described Mr. Aung Ko Win as a mentor and a business visionary.

Six years ago, Mr. Jonathan Kyaw Thaung asked a foreign employee to arrange a customized tour of London for Mr. Aung Ko Win, who is a fan of James Bond. Receipts and correspondence reviewed by The Times detailed the stops of the tour, which included a private boat ride on the Thames, with the sound system blasting "Skyfall" by Adele, the KBZ boss's favorite Bond theme song. At one point, the wind blew Mr. Aung Ko Win's hat off, and the skipper retrieved it, according to the foreign employee who spoke with The Times on the condition of anonymity for fear of retribution.

In Myanmar, Mr. Jonathan Kyaw Thaung ordered the design of a glass plinth decorated with a photograph of Mr. Aung Ko Win on the Thames. Topping the sculpture was Mr. Aung Ko Win's hat.

#### **Camouflage Inc.**

The European-made helicopter appeared destined for the Myanmar oil and gas industry.

But the \$2.16 million helicopter on sale in Brazil was not meant for commercial purposes, as a Kyaw Thaung contract indicated. It ended up with the Tatmadaw, the true recipient hidden behind falsified paperwork.

At one point, Myanmar's Department of Civil Aviation wrote in a letter to Brazilian authorities that the aircraft would be used for "Tourism and Oil and Gas industry." The letter was based on drafts with handwritten annotations provided by the KT Group, according to the foreign employee and copies reviewed by The Times.

A Tatmadaw officer was listed as a customer on separate internal paperwork for the helicopter, which was reviewed by The Times.

A letter from MWG, a Kyaw Thaung aviation company, requesting visas for six Brazilian crew members to enter Myanmar to deliver the helicopter was addressed not to civil aviation authorities but to the commander in chief of Myanmar's air force. The letter, which was also reviewed by The Times, specified that MWG would be handing over the Eurocopter to the Air Force.

When the foreign employee and the Brazilian crew arrived in Myanmar, he said they were met on the tarmac by about 20 men in blue uniforms who swarmed the helicopter, marveling over its features. The employee said he confronted Mr. Jonathan Kyaw Thaung when he returned to Myanmar, expressing discomfort at the deception.

Mr. Jonathan Kyaw Thaung declined to comment on the deal.

In March of this year on Armed Forces Day, General Min Aung Hlaing presided over a grand procession displaying Myanmar's weaponry. Above the parade flew a Eurocopter, one of several used by the military for maritime reconnaissance, Myanmar's official news media reported. The same day, more than 100 anti-coup protesters were killed by security forces, according to the monitoring group.

In the years before the coup, as foreign investors were flocking to Myanmar, Mr. Jonathan Kyaw Thaung presented his family business as the ideal intermediary, “one of Myanmar’s largest conglomerates,” according to company literature. He boasted of recognition from the World Economic Forum.

“Within 3 years Jonathan had set up offices in Azerbaijan, India, China and Singapore for KT Group and expanded KT Group business from a trading focus to a diversified conglomerate in present day with his entrepreneurship spirit, drive and vision,” said a company bio.

The reality was less grand.

The nerve center of the Kyaw Thaung business empire is a nondescript walk-up office building in Yangon, Myanmar’s largest city. At least 11 of the family’s businesses are registered here, but no grand nameplates mark their existence.

Online, their presence is thin as well. There is a website for the family foundation, but the KT Group’s website has been taken down. The website for Ky-Tha Group is “coming soon.”

The low profile was intentional, clouding the family’s connections to the Tatmadaw, according to the four former employees.

The KT Group, for instance, handled the import from Europe of at least two turboprops and two transport planes that entered the Tatmadaw fleet. The deals were made to look like commercial transfers to private companies, including its own and the crony aviation firm Air KBZ, rather than military procurement, according to the former employees.

The process could help avoid the possibility that the transactions might trigger European export bans placed on the Tatmadaw. The embargoes target equipment that might be used for internal repression, a wide enough category to possibly include aircraft used to transport soldiers or sanctioned military officers.

Mr. Jonathan Kyaw Thaung denied obscuring any aircraft deals. He said some planes had delivered Covid-19 vaccines.

Complicated company registrations also shrouded the Kyaw Thaungs’ connections to influential relatives and cronies. In 2014, Bashneft International, an energy company, partnered with Sun Apex Holdings, a company registered in the British Virgin Islands.

Despite its overseas incorporation, Sun Apex Holdings is a Kyaw Thaung company, a Times analysis of its business records shows. Among the people listed in the registration paperwork are an adviser to the Kyaw Thaungs and the daughter of the founder of KBZ.

Sun Apex had little experience in oil and gas, but it was among select local companies approved by the Myanmar ministry of energy to partner with foreign firms. The formal government approval for the Bashneft-Sun Apex deal was given by Mr. Zeyar Aung, the energy minister who is married to a Kyaw Thaung cousin. (He did not occupy that cabinet position when the bid was made.)

Mr. Jonathan Kyaw Thaung said that his relative never gave him preferential treatment.

### **Flying under the radar**

In 2015, the Singapore branch of a Kyaw Thaung company signed a deal to supply the Tatmadaw with a coastal radar technology system made by Thales, the weapons maker partly owned by the French government. The sales agreement for the surveillance system, called the Coast Watcher 100, was part of the leaked documents provided by Justice For Myanmar.

The Coast Watcher 100, which spanned a long coastline, required towers 50 meters high affixed with state-of-the-art radar. A British radar expert, who had worked on projects for Thales in Afghanistan and

Iraq, was brought in to direct the project. A French former defense attaché was hired as a general manager for international business development and now works at Thales.

As the [Rohingya crisis](#) intensified the Coast Watcher 100 was operational on Myanmar's western flank, which became the site of the world's fastest exodus of refugees in a generation.

The Tatmadaw swept through Rohingya villages, killing and raping civilians. To escape, Rohingya piled onto rickety boats. The Tatmadaw caught craft after craft.

In September 2017, during the frenzy of the Rohingya crisis, the Kyaw Thaung company arranged for Thales representatives to meet with senior officers of the Navy, another leaked document provided by Justice For Myanmar shows.

In a statement to The Times, Thales said that it "does not sell defense systems to Myanmar."

Mr. Jonathan Kyaw Thaung denied any knowledge of the Thales system.

It is not clear whether the Coast Watcher 100 was specifically used for tracking the Rohingya. But the system, which can pick up the presence of a small raft, had clear military applications during the exodus of refugees.

Maintenance of the Coast Watcher 100 continues. Leaked defense budgets for 2020-2021 show allocations of more than \$160,000 for servicing the radar system. The previous year, \$120,000 was spent for the same purpose, a record of foreign currency transactions shows, part of the trove from Justice For Myanmar.

Such outlays most likely contravene the European Union trade embargo on the Tatmadaw that targets equipment that might be used for repression, said Siemon Wezeman, a senior researcher at the [Stockholm International Peace Research Institute](#) and an expert in Tatmadaw procurement. The trade ban was strengthened in 2018, after the Rohingya massacres, cracking down on so-called dual-use products with either civilian or military purposes.

"The Rohingya are a coastal group, and automatically anything that is checking coastal waters would be for checking for movement of the Rohingya and might be used for repression, end of story," Mr. Wezeman said, referring to the Thales surveillance system.

The Kyaw Thaungs' procurement of aircraft for the Tatmadaw did raise concerns in Europe, but an inquiry went nowhere.

In 2017, MWG, the Kyaw Thaung aviation company, arranged the purchase of two Fokker planes from an arm of KLM Royal Dutch Airlines.

The planes now transport high-ranking Tatmadaw officials. In September, one flew to Moscow just as the deputy junta leader visited Russia.

The purchase prompted questions in the Dutch Parliament about how the Fokkers had ended up in the Myanmar Air Force fleet. The Dutch investigation concluded that the planes were purchased for commercial use by a Singaporean firm. That company was the Kyaw Thaung aviation arm, although it was not registered in Singapore at the time.

"It's civilian planes delivered to civilian companies, but they are used by a military force with a very bad reputation," said Martin Broek, an arms trade expert who tracked the delivery of Fokkers to the Tatmadaw.

Even before the putsch made foreign investments in Myanmar toxic, concerns about the military had started to haunt the Kyaw Thaungs.



A [human rights group](#) put a British port operator on a “dirty list” of international companies doing business with the Tatmadaw; it ran TMT Ports, a container terminal in Yangon that the Kyaw Thaungs leased for up to 70 years from a military conglomerate.

In 2020, the British firm said it would not renew its contract. Maersk, the world’s largest container shipping firm, also announced that it would not use the terminal.

Few of the family’s other aboveboard ventures have worked out. A telecom bid failed. Despite securing rights from the military for a prime tract of land in Yangon, the Kyaw Thaungs were unable to persuade foreign investors to build their “Lego concept” residential and retail space.

The Pegu Club is shuttered. Many of the civilian officials who attended its opening are now in prison.

Mr. Jonathan Kyaw Thaung said he took on big loans for the port and does not know how he will pay the \$3 million annual lease. Most of Myanmar’s shipping industry has evaporated, he said. The currency has collapsed. The [banking system has fractured](#). The country is broken, not taking into account [Covid’s toll](#). “If anyone is still standing in 18 months, it will be a miracle,” he said.

Mr. Jonathan Kyaw Thaung recently built a home in Naypyidaw, the bunkered city that replaced Yangon as the capital at the military’s behest earlier this century. Most civilians have little affection for the Tatmadaw’s capital, with its empty avenues and soulless ministries.

This summer, as his children played around him in Naypyidaw, a group of villagers carrying machetes confronted him. He said he defused the situation but was spooked by the encounter.

Over the past month or so, the parking garage of his office in Yangon has been bombed four times, he said. Nobody was hurt.

Since the coup, anonymous open letters from former Tatmadaw officers have accused the Kyaw Thaungs of being among Myanmar’s military procurers. With security forces training their guns on unarmed protesters, members of an armed resistance have assassinated those suspected of being government collaborators.

This summer, Mr. Jonathan Kyaw Thaung left Myanmar, taking his family with him.

“I don’t know what happens now,” he said. “Everything we’ve all done for the past 10 years is gone.”

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HEADLINE	<b>12/25 Africa countries toughen Covid restrictions</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.nytimes.com/2021/12/25/world/africa/africa-coronavirus-omicron.html?action=click&amp;module=Well&amp;pgtype=Homepage&amp;section=World%20News">https://www.nytimes.com/2021/12/25/world/africa/africa-coronavirus-omicron.html?action=click&amp;module=Well&amp;pgtype=Homepage&amp;section=World%20News</a>
GIST	<p>NAIROBI, Kenya — In just the past three weeks, the percentage of Kenyans who tested positive for the coronavirus jumped from less than 1 percent to more than 30 percent — the country’s highest positivity rate yet.</p> <p>In Uganda, nearly 50 lawmakers and their staff members, some of them vaccinated, tested positive this week after attending a sports tournament in neighboring Tanzania.</p> <p>And in Zimbabwe, skyrocketing infections have pushed the government to institute new restrictions on businesses and incoming travelers.</p> <p>Across Africa, countries are reporting a surge in Covid cases, and health officials worry about how the new Omicron variant will affect the world’s least-vaccinated continent. Omicron, which was first detected in southern Africa, remains highly contagious, but so far it is causing fewer deaths and hospitalizations than previous variants such as Delta.</p>

The latest wave comes as many African countries were beginning to reopen and businesses were hoping for a robust holiday season — only for governments to reintroduce curfews and quarantines and impose new vaccine mandates.

Even as Britain and the United States lifted Omicron-related travel restrictions on southern African states in the past week, Africans faced new travel restrictions from elsewhere because of the rising infections. Beginning Saturday, the United Arab Emirates is [suspending entry](#) for travelers from Ethiopia, Kenya, Nigeria and Tanzania, and impose additional requirements for those traveling from Ghana and Uganda.

“We are unfortunately going to be celebrating the end-of-the-year holiday season in the middle of the fourth wave that’s sweeping across the continent,” Dr. John N. Nkengasong, the head of the Africa Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, said at a news conference on Thursday.

At least 21 African countries are now experiencing a fourth wave of the pandemic, according to the Africa C.D.C. Three countries — Algeria, Kenya and Mauritius — are undergoing a fifth one.

Cases have more than doubled in recent weeks in nations including Botswana, Nigeria, Rwanda and Zimbabwe. Positivity rates have soared, too: Malawi reported a 46.29 percent positivity rate on Thursday compared with just a 1.54 percent rate on Nov. 30. Infections are surging among young people in Uganda, with some epidemiologists attributing that to younger age groups being the most active during the holiday season.

Omicron is tearing through Africa, with 22 nations now reporting the variant. It is not known whether the highly contagious variant is the dominant one or the one driving the surge of infections across Africa. But health experts say that even in countries where genomic sequencing is not readily available, the sudden bump in cases could point to the spread of the Omicron variant.

And experts say overall Covid infections in Africa are likely higher given the lack of widespread testing in many countries.

Early data from South Africa this past week suggested that the country’s Omicron wave [might have peaked](#), with officials [ending tracing efforts](#) and scrapping isolation for people who were possibly exposed but not experiencing symptoms. Another study showed that people diagnosed with Omicron in South Africa were [less likely to be hospitalized](#) than those with previous variants like Delta.

But Dr. Nkengasong warned that the data from South Africa might not hold for other countries, because the population there is relatively young and the vaccination rate is high compared with that of many other African countries.

“Let’s be careful not to extrapolate what we are seeing in South Africa across the continent or across the world,” he said.

In hospitals in many African cities, doctors are reporting more infections.

Tinashe Gede, an immunologist who works at the public Parirenyatwa General Hospital in the Zimbabwean capital, Harare, said he had seen an increase in admissions, but without the need for ventilators and life-support machines. A significant number of new cases he has treated have been breakthrough infections, he said, but symptoms have not been severe.

Health workers are getting sick, too.

At least 436 health workers tested positive last week at Dr. Gede’s hospital, according to Linos Dhire, the hospital’s spokesman.

Dr. Nelly Bosire, an obstetrician and gynecologist in Nairobi, said she had to call 10 pediatricians to find one to attend to a newborn on a recent night. Eight of them, she said, were either coughing, in isolation or had a confirmed Covid diagnosis. The virus, she said, was spreading like “wildfire.”

Dr. Matshidiso Moeti, the World Health Organization’s regional director for Africa, said she was still “cautiously optimistic” that severe illness and deaths will remain low in the fourth wave.

But [slow vaccine rollouts](#) might hamper those prospects, she added, given that only six African countries have hit the target set by the W.H.O. of fully vaccinating 40 percent of their population.

Even as vaccine supplies arrive, many African countries continue to face challenges getting them into people’s arms. It is difficult to deliver the vaccines to rural areas and to find enough temperature-controlled storage. [Vaccine skepticism plays a role, too](#); Dr. Nkengasong said that about 20 percent of Africans remained hesitant to get vaccinated.

Some donated vaccines do not have a long shelf life, prompting the authorities [in nations like Nigeria](#) to destroy them.

In Kenya, vaccine rollouts are hampered because health officials have not launched nationwide campaigns to convince their population of the benefits of Covid vaccines, said Anand Madhvani, the [Covid Kenya network](#) coordinator.

For now, governments are racing to institute a motley of rules to curb the fresh wave of infections. Rwanda [reimposed](#) a night curfew and suspended concerts. Several nations, including [Botswana](#), Ghana and [Malawi](#), have introduced vaccine mandates targeting local populations or incoming travelers.

On Wednesday, Kenya’s health ministry said it would bar unvaccinated people from public spaces, even though a [court recently halted the vaccine mandate](#). By Friday, some malls in the capital, Nairobi, had started asking shoppers and employees to show proof of vaccination.

The spike in cases and the ensuing restrictions are upending holiday plans for those like Denis Munjanja, a businessman in Harare who got sick with Covid last year. Mr. Munjanja said he was afraid of contracting the virus again, and he and his family have decided to stay indoors during the holiday season instead of mixing with loved ones.

Almost two years into a pandemic, he said, this wasn’t the festive mood he had hoped for. But he said, “We just have to be extra cautious.”

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HEADLINE	<b>12/24 Bangladesh: fire on crowded ferry kills 35</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.nytimes.com/2021/12/24/world/asia/bangladesh-ferry-fire.html">https://www.nytimes.com/2021/12/24/world/asia/bangladesh-ferry-fire.html</a>
GIST	<p>DHAKA, Bangladesh — A devastating fire on a crowded ferry in Bangladesh early Friday left at least 35 people dead and 100 others injured, officials said.</p> <p>The ferry was traveling to Barguna, in the southern part of the country, with 500 passengers on board, including children and older people. It caught fire on the Sugandha River near the town of Jhalakathi around 3 a.m.</p> <p>Several officials said the number of the dead was likely to rise because many who had jumped into the water to escape the fire were still missing. The district magistrate in the area said many of those rescued were in critical condition.</p> <p>Firefighters reached the site quickly, but a dense fog hampered rescue operations. The cause of the fire was not immediately clear.</p>

Kamal Uddin Bhuiyan, the deputy director of Bangladesh's fire service and civil defense agency in the region, said earlier that the bodies of 30 victims had been recovered, 26 of whom had died of suffocation. Four others drowned after jumping from the boat, and there were likely to be more, he said.

"Many passengers who jumped into the river may not be able to swim," Mr. Bhuiyan said.

Survivors described the horror and confusion of trying to escape in the darkness.

Mehrina Kamal Moon, who was on the ferry with her husband and 2-year-old son, said she saw people jumping from the top of the three-decker ferry into the water.

Her family made it to the second level, by which time the burning ferry had gotten closer to the riverbank.

"It was so dark around when we heard about the fire. We were clueless about what to do," Ms. Moon said by telephone. "I along with many others jumped from the second floor. We were fortunate to have land under our feet."

"It's God's grace that we are alive," she added.

While deadly fires in Bangladeshi factories and apartment buildings have made international headlines in recent years, ferry accidents are also common in the country of 165 million.

In June 2020, a ferry sank in Dhaka, the capital, after a collision with another ferry, claiming at least 30 lives. In 2014, a ferry with 250 people aboard sank near Dhaka, leaving about 100 dead or missing.

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HEADLINE	<b>12/24 Students return, but fallout long disruption</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.nytimes.com/2021/12/24/us/politics/covid-school-reopening-teen-mental-health.html">https://www.nytimes.com/2021/12/24/us/politics/covid-school-reopening-teen-mental-health.html</a>
GIST	<p>BETHLEHEM, Pa. — Three hours into a recent Monday morning, blood had already been spilled in a hallway at Liberty High School. With his walkie-talkie in hand, the principal, Harrison Bailey III, called on the custodial staff to clean up the remnants of a brawl while hurrying to the cafeteria in hopes of staving off another.</p> <p>This is how Dr. Bailey has spent many of his hours since the school welcomed back its 2,800 students for in-person learning in August: dashing around the 400,000-square-foot building, outrunning bells and crowds of students, and hoping that his towering presence will serve as an inspiration to pull up masks and a deterrent to other, less obvious burdens that his students have had to contend with since returning.</p> <p>Like schools across the country, Liberty has seen the damaging effects of a two-year pandemic that abruptly ejected millions of students from classrooms and isolated them from their peers as they weathered a historic convergence of academic, health and societal crises. <a href="#">Teenagers</a> arguably bore the <a href="#">social and emotional brunt</a> of school disruptions.</p> <p>Nationally, the high school-age group has reported some of the most alarming <a href="#">mental health declines</a>, evidenced by depression and suicide attempts. Adolescents have <a href="#">failed classes</a> critical to their futures at higher rates than in previous years, affecting graduations and college prospects. And as elected leaders and public health officials scrambled to bring students back to school last winter and spring, the focus on having the youngest and most vulnerable students return to in-person instruction left many high school students to languish, with large numbers missing most or all of the 2020-21 academic year.</p> <p>And now schools like Liberty must brace for an Omicron-fueled wave of new infections, adding still more uncertainty.</p>

On a recent day, as Dr. Bailey stood in one of Liberty's busiest hallways — nicknamed the Hall of Fame for its frequent disruptive episodes — he described how the resignation and indignation that students brought back to school this year was palpable.

"It's like there's a bomb somewhere," he said. "And you're just hoping no one lights a match."

Throughout the fall, the effects of the coronavirus pandemic have rippled through Liberty, a diverse regional high school in the Lehigh Valley in Pennsylvania, in the city of 75,000 where the famous Bethlehem Steel was founded.

The school's wellness center has been overwhelmed with students struggling with anxiety and depression since the first day back. By the end of September, fights were frequent, and "blunt and flagrant disrespect" was rampant, Dr. Bailey said. In October, homecoming pep rallies were canceled for freshmen and sophomores, partly to follow Covid-19 restrictions and minimize crowds. By November, the principal was averaging at least one "informal hearing" per day for students who had been suspended.

By December, referrals for the school's Student Assistance Program — in which teams of counselors and administrators coordinate resources for troubled students — had reached 300, compared with a total of 500 for the entire 2019-20 school year. At a recent meeting, where administrators sifted through their caseloads of "sapped" students, they described them in blunt terms: "feral," "a mess" and "work in progress."

"I think kids are just feeling like — after witnessing Trump, political unrest, what happened in the streets with Black Lives Matter, now the pandemic — the world's out of control," Dr. Bailey said. "So they're like, 'The world's out of control, why should I be in control?'"

Liberty's staff is not faring much better. Only a handful of teachers have taken a formal leave of absence, but they are not whom Dr. Bailey worries about most. He is concerned about the ones "right on the edge."

He has noticed that some teachers with strong classroom management skills are sending their first referrals to his office. Some of the most engaged staff members — those who have volunteered to lead clubs — have had to pull back to focus on new challenges in their classrooms or their own lives. And for some, the "acting out" among some students is far less concerning than the sheer apathy they have encountered.

"For the teachers, like all of us, they're here for the kids, not the money," Dr. Bailey said. "So to have a higher number of kids you can't reach, it's intense."

While conflicts over coronavirus-response strategies like masks and quarantines have dominated reopening debates, school leaders say it is the day-to-day tasks of running a school building that have brought the most turmoil.

And while much attention has been paid to besieged superintendents and burned-out teachers, the responsibility to restore a sense of normalcy has largely fallen on principals.

At the beginning of the school year, Dr. Bailey, who has led Liberty for a decade and is the state's principal of the year, told his staff that their mission was to survive. He warned that the year "would be the most difficult time to be in education since we sent kids to Vietnam."

At Liberty, vestiges of remote learning linger. Many students wear pajamas, the dress code of bedrooms turned to classrooms and a reflection of disrupted sleep schedules. Students move through the hallways sluggishly, looking at their phones or straight ahead, as if still staring at computer screens.

Last year, 66 percent of students did hybrid learning, and more than 33 percent went completely virtual. Students and educators use terms like "re-entry," "recivilizing" and "reintegrating" to describe the transition back to a more normal routine. Covid restrictions still prevent full engagement. Masks have encouraged anonymity and discouraged dialogue.

“People don’t know how to communicate anymore,” said Jazlyn Korpics, 18, a senior at Liberty. “Everybody’s a robot now — their minds are warped.”

Josiah Correa, 18, said that while he was a senior at Liberty, “every day it feels like I’m starting a new school.”

For Nikolas Tsamoutalidis, an assistant principal, the most vivid image of the post-pandemic student body was at lunch this year, when he saw ninth graders — whose last full year in school was seventh grade — preparing to play “Duck, Duck, Goose.” “It’s like fifth or sixth graders,” he said, “but in big bodies.”

The cheeriest part of the school is the wellness center, with social workers, therapists, bean bag chairs and soothing paint colors. Dr. Bailey used grant dollars to build it a year and a half ago as part of his plan to make Liberty a “trauma-informed school.” Even before the pandemic, the district was looking to [use the center as a model](#) for addressing the mental health crisis brewing in Bethlehem and beyond.

Nancy Ettwein, who ran the wellness center until November, said that the need for services at the beginning of the school year was “off the Richter scale.”

“The No. 1 thing is anxiety,” she said in September. “Anxiety about being in the classroom, being in front of people, speaking to people, anyone looking at them.”

Robin Sorensen, the wellness center’s clinical supervisor, said the school would be “lost” had Dr. Bailey not created the space. The four therapists’ caseloads are nearly full. “I’ve never seen more referrals for mental health that just say, ‘Sitting and crying in the bathroom,’” Ms. Sorensen said.

Kaisyn Carswell, 16, filed in on a recent day after he came across someone being jumped in the boys’ bathroom. The center, which he visits several times a week for therapy and “breaks,” has helped him weather life during the pandemic, which he described as “when you feel emptiness, but the emptiness is really heavy.”

Dr. Bailey’s 75th “informal hearing” of the year illustrated perhaps his biggest challenge with the pandemic-era student body.

He had been preparing to offer a ninth-grade student “cyberschooling,” as it is called here, after the student had been suspended for three days.

The student had been late 29 times, and had 12 absences and 63 class cuts. As Dr. Bailey read out the freshman’s single-digit class averages, his voice changed when he got to 53 percent in U.S. history.

“Wow. You’re smart! How do you never go to class and get a 53?” he said.

The student responded that school was not challenging, and that in middle school it had been easy to do just well enough to play sports. Now the student had no interest in joining Liberty’s sports teams, and didn’t see the point in attending class; it was more important to get a job and make money for a future family.

“What did you do last year?” Dr. Bailey asked.

“Just played video games all day,” the student responded.

Instead of referring the student to remote school, Dr. Bailey advised starting fresh the next morning. He ended the hearing with a hopeful handshake but walked back to his office defeated.

“We’re running out of Band-Aids,” he said. “The schools are bleeding out, and it feels like no one is listening.”



Across the country, [principals are echoing](#) Dr. Bailey's distress.

[Survey results](#) released this month by the National Association of Secondary School Principals raised alarms that the pipeline of principals might be another casualty of the pandemic, as their roles grow more amorphous and untenable.

In responses to the survey, which included a nationally representative sample of leaders, only 35 percent said they "strongly agree" with being generally satisfied in their jobs, down from 63 percent in 2019.

Ranking among the highest on their list of challenges during the pandemic was providing mental health support to students and providing guidance and mental health support to staff. Sixty-eight percent were worried about teacher shortages and teacher burnout.

Only 23 percent "strongly agree" that the size of their administrative team is adequate to support staff and students, and only 21 percent "strongly agree" that there are adequate student services personnel like nurses and counselors.

While funding and political will were seen as the answers to [reopening schools](#), they have done little to solve real-time issues like labor shortages and a drought of community services, which have been exacerbated by the pandemic.

"The thing that is really frustrating our members is that they can see that there are resources out there in the world," said Ronn Nozoe, the chief executive of the National Association of Secondary School Principals. "And it burns them to the core that they don't have the systems and structures and processes and power to marshal that all together to serve their students."

"They know every single day, students, parents and educators are struggling, and they're trying to do everything they can," he added. "And they can't be everything to everybody."

Staff members fear that Dr. Bailey, 49, may kill himself trying.

"I worry to keep us from falling apart, he keeps it all in," said Fred Harris, the school's athletic director, who has known Dr. Bailey for 12 years.

At an administrative hearing in December, Dr. Bailey tried to calmly steer his team to winter break. The agenda for the meeting was 10 items long; as they moved down each one, administrators grew more exasperated.

There was a new directive from the district that required testing athletes, but Dr. Bailey still needed the school's athletic director to cover three lunch periods.

"I can't do it," Mr. Harris said. "I'm only one guy."

There were 185 students failing 348 classes and tension over what to communicate to teachers with the highest numbers of failing students.

"Tell them you have the freedom to be creative," Dr. Bailey told his team. Do what you have to do to get students to pass.

"I'm concerned we're going to give the impression that all kids deserve to pass," one of his colleagues shot back.

The school district had proposed a plan, based on an increase of "volatile incidents," to transfer students to online schooling as an alternative to expulsion.

	<p>“It’s anti-academic, and honestly this is about trying to salvage an environment for adults,” an assistant principal said of the plan.</p> <p>On top of that, the school was bracing for its first student mask exemption, just as coronavirus cases were surging after Thanksgiving.</p> <p>“Her mom’s yelled at me. Her dad’s yelled at me. She’s not going to wear the mask,” an assistant principal said. “What do we do if other students and teachers don’t want to be around her?”</p> <p>“Let’s deal with that when it happens,” Dr. Bailey replied. “It’ll be stormy, but we’ll weather it. We always do.”</p>
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HEADLINE	<b>12/24 Europeans living with not defeating Covid?</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.nytimes.com/2021/12/24/world/europe/europe-covid-pandemic-omicron.html?action=click&amp;module=Well&amp;pgtype=Homepage&amp;section=World%20News">https://www.nytimes.com/2021/12/24/world/europe/europe-covid-pandemic-omicron.html?action=click&amp;module=Well&amp;pgtype=Homepage&amp;section=World%20News</a>
GIST	<p>MADRID — Covid-19 infections were rising all across Spain, but the message from the country’s leader was clear: The government was not entering 2022 with the restrictions of 2020.</p> <p>“The situation is different this time, and because of that, we’re taking different measures,” Pedro Sánchez, the prime minister, said this week, adding that he understood his people had grown impatient with the pandemic and that he was “fully aware of the fatigue.”</p> <p>Across Europe, that fatigue is as palpable as the dampened Christmas spirit. The fatigue of another named variant of the coronavirus and another wave of infections. The fatigue of another grim year watching New Year’s Eve gatherings get canceled or curtailed, one by one.</p> <p>But along with the exhaustion, another feeling is taking root: that the coronavirus will not be eradicated with vaccines or lockdowns, but has become something endemic that people must learn to live with, maybe for years to come.</p> <p>“We’re tired, we’re inoculated and it’s not going anywhere,” said Caroline Orieux, who, despite surging Covid cases, had visited Paris with her nephews and nieces for a few days of vacation.</p> <p>This week, the rough outlines of how Europe might manage its latest outbreak were taking shape, at least for now, driven by everything from politics to people’s desperation to move on, especially at Christmas. Full lockdowns have mainly given way to less intrusive — and less protective — measures.</p> <p>Spain kept a light touch, issuing limited new requirements on Thursday, like mandating masks outdoors and increasing the vaccination drive.</p> <p>Even Italy, which suffered a particularly cruel first wave, introduced new rules on Thursday that were far less rigid than those imposed during its worst days, shortening the time frame that health passes remained valid, making third shots indispensable; banning large outdoor events until the end of January; and opting for an outdoor mask mandate.</p> <p>“Vaccines are and remain a fundamental weapon,” said Roberto Speranza, Italy’s health minister.</p> <p>Beyond that, there is growing evidence that the new variant is more mild, at least for those who are vaccinated. Three studies — in South Africa, England and Scotland — all suggested that while the variant is more contagious, it likely results in a more mild illness.</p> <p>And vaccines appear to be doing their jobs — <a href="#">reducing the risk of severe disease and hospitalization</a>, according to recent studies.</p>

Still, not everyone agrees with a scaled-down approach to fighting the virus, and it remains unclear if that notion will survive the possible Omicron crush of hospitalizations that many scientists fear. Even if most cases are mild, they argue, Omicron's quick-fire spread could still lead to huge caseloads and overwhelming hospital admissions.

Antoine Flahault, the director of the Institute of Global Health in Geneva, said France's strategy — which went little beyond health passes and had stopped short of imposing stricter measures like bar closures — was nowhere near what was needed to stave off a wave of Omicron cases.

"I think it's not the most successful one from a health perspective, but also from a social and economic perspective," he said, noting that a surge of new infections could disrupt health services as well as the country's manufacturing and supply capacities.

Giovanni Maga, the director of the Institute of Molecular Genetics at Italy's National Council for Research, noted that while hospitalizations were five times lower than they were last year — largely thanks to vaccines — that does not mean that the country is out of the woods.

"As Omicron is more infectious, contagions will rise," he said.

Yet as the pandemic drags on, scientists are often losing out to politicians. And in the political and economic calculus that has become the core of public health messaging for weeks now, the Christmas season has loomed large.

Switzerland recently backtracked on travel restrictions to try to salvage a winter tourism season that is a cornerstone of its economy. In late November, it issued quarantine orders for travelers from Britain, the Netherlands and other countries where Omicron had spread — only to remove them, even as cases rose.

On Monday, the country also removed a requirement that travelers test after arriving, though it still requires negative tests before travel.

Asseghid Dinberu, the marketing director of the Victoria Hotel in the Swiss ski resort of Villars, said the Christmas season was feeling like "a lucky escape," with only six of the hotel's 138 rooms still vacant for Christmas Day, and the hotel fully booked for New Year's.

"I'm glad that Switzerland has finally opted for a very pragmatic approach that will allow us to benefit economically compared to other countries," he said.

Germany is coming out of a dramatic fourth wave that began in November, and although it is bracing for a wave of Omicron infections, government officials have played down the possibility of a surge in infections around Christmas gatherings. Many see that as an attempt to spare Germans from restrictions before their most important holiday.

"At the moment, we are in a strange interval," Chancellor Olaf Scholz said Tuesday at a news conference. "The measures we put into place at the end of November are working."

However, just before Mr. Scholz and state governors met to hammer out new measures this week, the Robert Koch Institute, Germany's equivalent of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, called for strict lockdown measures to start immediately. The government did not adopt the measures.

The many conflicting messages have caused confusion among Europeans pining for the ease of Christmases past. Some carried on despite pangs of anxiety.

"I worry a bit because we don't know much about Omicron," Susanne Sesterer, 63, a retiree in Hanover, Germany, said on Thursday as she was doing her last shopping before Christmas. "But how much worse can it get?"

Others were giving up.

Dorotea Belli, a 42-year-old Italian who has had two vaccine doses, said she would not go to a family gathering for Christmas and instead stay home in Rome. Many of her colleagues had tested positive for the virus, she said, and her children, 4 and 1, are not eligible for vaccination.

“They and I will miss my parents very much,” she said. “But I don’t want to bring Covid around, and even if my husband and I are vaccinated, who knows?”

Spain’s calculus on new restrictions is not only factoring in the all-important holidays, but also legal barriers that emerged after measures taken by the government in 2020.

In July, Spain’s Constitutional Court ruled that the government did not have the authority to impose the lockdown measures that began in March 2020, which restricted Spaniards from leaving their homes except for essential trips like food shopping. Instead, the judges said, the measures required a full parliamentary vote, which few see passing with a majority in the future given how controversial the previous restrictions were.

“The government has its hands tied now,” said Luis Galán Soldevilla, a law professor at the University of Córdoba.

Spain’s lighter measures announced on Thursday received criticism from some sectors, like the Spanish Society of Public Health and Health Administration, a group that includes many health professionals.

“These measures don’t help much,” said Ildefonso Hernández, the group’s spokesman, saying limiting capacity indoors would be more effective. “It makes no sense that people walk the street with a mask and then take it off when they enter a bar.”

In Madrid, residents were charging ahead with their Christmas plans, despite the rising caseload and risks.

Fernando Sánchez, 55, a taxi driver, lost his mother and brother to Covid-19 six months ago. Nevertheless, he was unwilling to cancel his Christmas plans, which this year take place at the home of his in-laws, much as they had before the pandemic.

Antonio Jesús Navarro, 33, a software engineer, had been looking forward to spending Christmas with his girlfriend, who had traveled to Spain for the holidays from the United States. The two had not seen each other since before the pandemic began.

But then Mr. Navarro learned he had come into contact with someone who had tested positive for the coronavirus. The couple were isolating until he could get his own test results. He said he was frustrated with public messaging on how to stay safe from Omicron.

“Is an antigen test acceptable?” he said by telephone. “What happens if there are no symptoms?”

Hours later, Mr. Navarro called back to say he and his girlfriend had tested positive for Covid-19.

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HEADLINE	12/24 South Africa ends quarantines, tracing
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.nytimes.com/live/2021/12/24/world/omicron-covid-vaccine-tests#south-africa-covid-quarantine">https://www.nytimes.com/live/2021/12/24/world/omicron-covid-vaccine-tests#south-africa-covid-quarantine</a>
GIST	<p>South Africa’s government, buoyed by encouraging <a href="#">data showing that infections from the Omicron variant aren’t as severe</a>, has dropped quarantine restrictions for all but symptomatic people.</p> <p>That includes allowing people who have tested positive but show no symptoms to gather with others, so long as they wear a mask and social distance. A top health official explained that since the variant spreads</p>

so quickly, there are likely many infected people socializing with others and it no longer made sense to quarantine only those who have tested themselves.

The move was yet another step toward a slow acceptance that many countries around the world will likely need to find a way to live with Covid, rather than avoid it. The new measures follow recommendations from a committee of experts who called for focusing on vaccinations rather than contact tracing and quarantining.

“There is greater recognition that, in the face of a hyper-contagious variant like this, quarantining and isolation are no longer effective as public health containment measures to contain the virus,” said Professor Francois Venter, a researcher at the University of the Witwatersrand in Johannesburg and a former member of the committee.

The new protocols go into effect immediately, the health ministry said in a notice to local health department heads. The revisions were based on data showing that immunity resulting from previous infections was as high as 80 percent. That, coupled with a vaccination rate of nearly 45 percent among adults in the country, has kept hospitalizations lower, the South African government said.

A high proportion of cases in South Africa have been asymptomatic, so quarantine measures have been skewed toward those with symptoms. That has been particularly true in the recent wave of infections driven by the Omicron variant, during which cases increased steeply, but just over 5 percent [led to hospital admissions](#).

“Containment strategies are no longer appropriate — mitigation is the only viable strategy,” the notice said.

The new regulations are intended to benefit essential services, the ministry said. Since the pandemic began, nearly one in five public health sector workers have contracted the coronavirus, the health ministry said this month.

Under the new guidance, people who test positive but are asymptomatic will no longer need to quarantine. People showing mild symptoms like fever, cough and loss of taste or smell are still required to isolate for eight days. It is also no longer necessary to show a negative Covid-19 test before returning to work after isolation.

Ramphelane Morewane, the acting deputy director-general of the health department, said that “most people who are walking around may be asymptomatic” and people who test positive but don’t have symptoms should wear masks and take other precautions to avoid transmitting the virus.

Covid-19 testing will be required if a person has symptoms. Anyone who came in contact with someone who tested positive would not need to quarantine, and must instead do “self-observation” for five to seven days and avoid crowded gatherings, the ministry said.

A booster shot of the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine will be available starting on Tuesday for people who received their first dose at least six months ago or who are at higher risk for becoming severely ill. The South African authorities also authorized a booster shot for the Johnson & Johnson vaccine.

The rollout of the Johnson & Johnson shot follows a local study of its efficacy against breakthrough infections, including after the detection of the Omicron variant. The study administered more than 230,000 booster shots, largely to health workers, and found that its protection against hospital admission was “at least equivalent to other vaccines,” the health ministry said.

The South African health authorities said they would not follow a recommendation from the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention that Covid vaccines other than Johnson & Johnson’s should be preferred amid increasing evidence that the shot can trigger a rare blood clotting disorder.

	<p>South African health authorities issued a circumspect response, saying the C.D.C. warning was in the context of the United States' having "an abundance of vaccines."</p> <p>Professor Linda-Gail Bekker, one of the study's lead researchers, said the data from South Africa showed that "in low- and middle-income countries, this single-dose vaccine has great utility."</p>
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HEADLINE	<b>12/24 US lifts travel ban to southern Africa</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.nytimes.com/live/2021/12/24/world/omicron-covid-vaccine-tests#south-africa-united-states-travel">https://www.nytimes.com/live/2021/12/24/world/omicron-covid-vaccine-tests#south-africa-united-states-travel</a>
GIST	<p>President Biden will remove the ban on travel between the United States and countries in southern Africa at midnight on Dec. 31, a senior administration official said on Friday, reversing restrictions imposed last month to combat the spread of the Omicron variant.</p> <p>The region's leaders had denounced the ban as unfair, discriminatory and unnecessary.</p> <p>Mr. Biden made the decision this week on the advice of his medical team based on findings that existing Covid vaccines are effective against severe disease with the highly contagious Omicron variant, especially among people who have received a booster shot of the Pfizer-BioNTech or Moderna vaccine, the senior official said in an email.</p> <p>The decision followed the British government's announcement on Tuesday <a href="#">that it was lifting its restrictions on travelers</a> arriving from 11 African countries.</p> <p>Officials with the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention also advised Mr. Biden and his team that Omicron, which has passed Delta as the dominant variant in the United States, was so widely present across the world that it no longer made sense to restrict travel to and from South Africa, Botswana, Eswatini, Lesotho, Malawi, Mozambique and Namibia, the official said.</p> <p><a href="#">The ban</a> was announced on Nov. 26, after officials in South Africa reported the emergence of the variant, which has a large number of mutations that allow it to evade the immune response of even vaccinated people. The ban went into effect at midnight on Nov. 29.</p> <p>The countries in southern Africa will now be subject to the same protocols imposed on all nations, with a requirement that foreign incoming travelers be fully vaccinated and show proof of a negative coronavirus test within one day of their trips.</p> <p>"We certainly welcome this development," Clayson Monyela, head of public diplomacy in South Africa's department of international relations, said on Friday. "We've always maintained that these travel bans were unscientific and discriminatory. They've had a devastating impact on our travel and tourism industry, on business and families."</p> <p>Lemogang Kwappe, Botswana's foreign minister, said officials there were delighted by the news. "We hope the world would come together as one to fight all the challenges that we are besieged with," he added.</p> <p>The restrictions drew immediate criticism from regional leaders, critics from Mr. Biden's own party and international health officials.</p> <p>"Travel restrictions may play a role in slightly reducing the spread of Covid-19 but place a heavy burden on lives and livelihoods," Matshidiso Moeti, the regional director for Africa for the World Health Organization, said at the time the ban was announced. "If restrictions are implemented, they should not be unnecessarily invasive or intrusive, and should be scientifically based."</p>
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HEADLINE	<b>12/24 Thousands last-minute flight cancelations</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.nytimes.com/live/2021/12/24/world/omicron-covid-vaccine-tests#canceled-flights-omicron">https://www.nytimes.com/live/2021/12/24/world/omicron-covid-vaccine-tests#canceled-flights-omicron</a>



Thousands of would-be travelers received last-minute cancellations of their Christmas flights on Friday and Saturday because of the recent spike of Omicron cases, including among airline workers.

The number of cancellations globally for Christmas Eve and Christmas Day added up to [more than 3,800](#), the [Flight Aware website](#) showed, with more than 1,000 in the United States. Although the cancellations represented a relatively small percentage of the roughly 80,000 arrivals on any given day, they were a jarring disruption in a [holiday season](#) shadowed by the highly transmissible [Omicron variant](#), which now accounts for [more than 70 percent](#) of new coronavirus cases in the United States.

United Airlines canceled 176 flights of the 4,000 domestic and international flights scheduled at dozens of airports on Friday, mostly the result of crew members calling in sick, said Joshua Freed, a spokesman for the Chicago-based carrier. At least 44 more flights on Saturday have already been canceled, he added.

A spokeswoman for Delta Air Lines said that it had canceled 158 of the 3,100 flights scheduled for Friday, Christmas Eve, one of the most hectic travel days of the year. The Atlanta-based airline was exhausting “all options and resources,” including rerouting and substituting planes and crews to cover scheduled flights.

The cancellations were caused by “a combination of issues, including weather and Omicron-related issues, and Delta expected at least 150 more cancellations over the weekend, spokeswoman Kate Modolo said.

Alaska Airlines had 17 cancellations on Thursday after a growing number of crew members reported exposure to the virus, but the carrier only needed to scrap nine flights on Friday, according to a spokesperson.

Other airlines, including JetBlue and Allegiant, did the same, according to [Flight Aware](#), although American Airlines said that it currently had no flight cancellations.

While most travelers have been able to get where they are going, hundreds of people who had anticipated the first near-normal holiday season in years when they booked, scrambled for alternatives.

Mats, blankets and pillows littered the floors of the Minneapolis-St. Paul International Airport on the morning of Christmas Eve. The impromptu accommodations emptied out before sunrise as those who had spent the night because of flight delays and cancellations tried to rebook their seats.

Joe Lampkin, a traveler from the Minneapolis area, was waiting near Gate D4 early Friday, trying to get on a flight later in the morning to Seattle, where his family is waiting for him.

“Hopefully that one doesn’t get canceled,” Mr. Lampkin said.

At the Atlanta airport, the location of Delta’s headquarters, a line of about 30 people waited for a help desk in Terminal A, where two Delta employees were trying to sort things out for passengers with canceled and delayed flights.

Customers took to social media to air their grievances about the cancellations.

The United States is recording nearly 187,000 new daily cases, a 55 percent increase over the last two weeks, according to The New York Times’s [coronavirus tracker](#).

Similar problems were cropping up around the globe as airline staff members called in reports of illness or exposure to the virus.

“A large number of our frontline team members are being required to test and isolate as close contacts given the increasing number of cases in the general community,” said a representative for Australia-based Jetstar Airways, which had to cancel about 80 flights.

	<p>Staffing shortages have been affecting a range of service industries as the virus continues to spread.</p> <p>England said this week that it was reducing the number of days that people must isolate for after showing Covid-19 symptoms to seven days from 10 days, a change that officials said could help alleviate the shortages. The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention made a similar move on Thursday, though that change applies only to health workers.</p>
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HEADLINE	<b>12/24 Feds probe Nooksack tribe disenrollment</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.seattletimes.com/seattle-news/politics/nooksack-members-targeted-with-disenrollment-face-eviction-by-tribe-as-feds-investigate/">https://www.seattletimes.com/seattle-news/politics/nooksack-members-targeted-with-disenrollment-face-eviction-by-tribe-as-feds-investigate/</a>
GIST	<p>A long-running dispute over membership in the Nooksack Indian Tribe, based east of Bellingham, is flaring up again after several years of relative quiet.</p> <p>The Nooksack government, which began an effort nearly a decade ago to disenroll more than 300 of the tribe's roughly 2,000 members, is moving ahead with a multistep process leading toward the eviction of certain families from their homes.</p> <p>Tribal police have visited a number of families in recent weeks to deliver notices related to that process, including at least one order to vacate, stirring consternation among the families during the pandemic and holiday season, and causing their Seattle lawyer to ask federal authorities to step in.</p> <p>The possible evictions of the families stem from disenrollment — involving contested questions of ancestry, rather than missed rent or maintenance, according to their lawyer, Gabe Galanda, who's alleging civil rights violations.</p> <p>As of Thursday, two U.S. agencies had asked the tribe to press pause while they investigate. The Nooksack government is closed this week, but Ross Cline Sr., chair of the Tribal Council, said in an interview Friday, "As far as I know, we're forging ahead."</p> <p>Most of the so-called "Nooksack 306" live off tribal property, but there are 21 households with 63 people vulnerable to eviction, including seniors and children, according to Galanda. Their homes have been subsidized by federal programs, including rent-to-own programs, he says.</p> <p>"We've got thick skin from them attacking us, but this time it just seems to have a bit more teeth," said Michelle Roberts, 57, who along with her husband is facing eviction from the home they've lived in for about 15 years. "They're getting closer to kicking us out."</p> <p>Cline says the tribe is simply taking overdue action to enforce its rules. He worries Galanda's aggressive lobbying may be winning over federal bureaucrats and says the lawyer, a member of the Round Valley Indian Tribes of California, is meddling.</p> <p>"He might be Indian but he doesn't want Indians to have sovereignty," Cline said about Galanda.</p> <p>The U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, which Galanda argues has funded the relevant Nooksack homes, has sent several letters to the tribe "raising concerns about potential violations of the Indian Civil Rights Act as well as potential HUD programmatic compliance issues," a HUD spokesperson said this week.</p> <p>HUD referred the matter to the U.S. Department of the Interior in September, requesting at that time and more recently that the tribe hold off on the evictions until after a HUD review and Interior investigation, the spokesperson added.</p> <p>An Interior spokesperson declined to comment this week, but Darryl LaCounte, the department's Bureau of Indian Affairs director, sent a letter with similar points to Cline on Thursday.</p>

“The Bureau of Indian Affairs respects tribal sovereignty and supports tribal self-determination. We are also responsible for ensuring all applicable laws and regulations are adhered to in the execution of federal programs,” LaCounte’s letter says.

“We have been notified that the Nooksack Tribe has planned several evictions ... [that] may include individuals who have purchased their homes under a lease with the Tribe and may involve [HUD] funding. There are extremely concerning allegations of potential Civil Rights Act and Indian Civil Rights Act violations,” the letter continues, asking the tribe to delay for at least 30 days.

The letter adds, “We understand that some of these individuals are elderly and evicting them in the winter months could have serious effects on their health and well-being.”

Asked about the letter Friday, Cline said the Nooksack Tribe is cooperating with the agencies by providing certain materials for review. He also referred to the Bureau of Indian Affairs as “BIA — Bossing Indians Around.”

In October, in response to an earlier letter from the Bureau of Indian Affairs, Cline described the allegations raised by Galanda as baseless.

He wrote, in part: “The Tribe has spent the past years attempting to strengthen its relationship with [the Department of the Interior]. ... After years of progress, the Tribe is again forced to respond to vague allegations funneled through [the department].”

### **The backstory**

Earlier episodes in the dispute made the Nooksack 306 poster children for disenrollment across the country, and Galanda [a leading opponent](#) of the practice, which can involve struggles over power and resources, and questions about culture and identity.

Federal and state authorities normally don’t intervene in tribal affairs, because federal law and court rulings recognize tribes as sovereign. But various moves by the Nooksack government led the authorities [a few years ago](#) to withhold millions of dollars of funding.

Cline says the 306 were incorrectly enrolled in the 1980s and cannot prove their tribal lineage adequately, according to the tribe’s constitution and bylaws, and were legally disenrolled by the Tribal Council. There were disenrollment proceedings in 2016, with ratification by phone poll in 2018.

Nooksack members must trace their families back to a certain group of homesteaders or a 1942 census, Cline says, contending the 306 descend from a related band based in Canada and meet neither criteria.

The 306 and Galanda still dispute the disenrollments, however, both on the merits (of ancestry and documentation) and in terms of how the decisions were made (with 10-minute phone hearings at one point).

“My grandmother spoke the language. She was one of the last cedar basket weavers,” Roberts said. “We had the upbringing.”

Galanda contends his clients are unusually vulnerable with respect to their housing, because the Nooksack government has barred him and other adversarial lawyers not employed by the tribe from representing them in tribal affairs.

“Everybody needs to have human rights protection,” he said.

Cline says he wants to put the disenrollment battle to rest once and for all.

“The Nooksack Tribe has paid dearly for what little it has,” Cline said, arguing the continued integration of the 306 could pose a threat to the tribe’s cohesion. “In a way I guess you could call it genocide, making the blood thinner and thinner,” he said.

Complicating things, some families facing eviction include both enrolled and disenrolled members. “I just canceled Christmas to save money” for possibly needing to move, said Saturnino Javier, 47, who received a 14-day notice to vacate on Dec. 13.

### What’s happening

The tribe [previously sought](#) to evict one of the 306, but multiple lawsuits brought by Galanda held the housing matter in limbo for years, while the lawsuits were pending in U.S. courts, says Cline, who was elected in 2018. Those lawsuits were dismissed earlier this year on jurisdictional grounds.

“It was like dominoes falling, one after the other,” Cline said. “That cleared the way for us to start the eviction process. ... I think all [the households with disenrolled members] will eventually be facing eviction.”

Only enrolled members are certified for tribal housing, according to the Nooksack government. Police delivering notices is “standard procedure” for the tribe, and there are opportunities during the decertification and eviction process for people to contest their cases, Cline says.

Galanda and his clients say the police visits — some outside business hours — are unnecessary and intimidating. They say the opportunities to contest their cases are window dressing.

“I want to say these are courtesy meetings,” Roberts said. “We don’t have any due process because we can’t have any representation.”

The HUD connection is crucial, Galanda contends, saying almost all the homes in question were developed as rent-to-own residences, which means his clients should own their homes or hold equity. Cline objects to that characterization and says documentation will demonstrate he’s right.

In recent weeks, Galanda has sought intervention from multiple agencies, even submitting an appeal to the “special rapporteur for adequate housing” at the United Nations. “I’ve been begging for help,” he said, describing the dispute as approaching a “breaking point.”

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HEADLINE	12/24 Lack resources for homeless extreme cold
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.king5.com/article/news/local/western-washington-lacks-resources-for-homeless-in-extreme-weather/281-33d8a735-ec78-4152-9580-6b4dc8db614b">https://www.king5.com/article/news/local/western-washington-lacks-resources-for-homeless-in-extreme-weather/281-33d8a735-ec78-4152-9580-6b4dc8db614b</a>
GIST	<p>SEATTLE — This summer, it was the extreme heat, and now western Washington is about to see the <a href="#">impacts of extreme cold</a>. Just like the heat, the state's homeless and low-income populations are going to feel the worst impacts of the weather.</p> <p>The reality is, there aren't enough shelter beds or staff to address the situation facing the region. Non-profits are working to hand out blankets and hand-warmers to help people survive and stay warm because it's likely thousands will be sleeping in the freezing cold.</p> <p>"Same thing I always do, trying to survive. Keeping my head up and praying," said Lamont Berrysmith when asked what his plans are for the extreme cold.</p> <p>Berrysmith lives in a tent in Belltown. He said he's been homeless for more than 20 years.</p> <p>Counties have released cold weather plans, but the plans do not include enough beds to house people. Some counties will have warming shelters during the day but no additional overnight space.</p>

"We certainly don't have thousands of emergency beds right now that we're able to stand up," said [Compass Housing Alliance](#) Executive Director Mary Steele.

Compass Housing Alliance already operates a shelter and was able to add 80 additional beds starting this weekend for people looking to get out of the cold.

"The first couple nights, you don't have a lot of folks who come in, but as the days go by, more and more people take advantage," said Steele.

In Thurston County, shelters are expected to hit capacity. The county is [calling for donations to help](#) people keep warm.

"Hand-warmers and blankets and tarps, so people have the survival gear once the shelter closes," said Darian Lightfoot, the housing program manager for the city of Olympia.

A constraint for groups looking to open more overnight space is staffing. Non-profits have fewer volunteers because of the pandemic, have staff out with COVID-19, and like many industries, are feeling the brunt of staff being worn down.

"Our folks are on the frontlines every day being heroes," said Steele. "Two of my staff members have saved lives in the past week."

Steele doesn't expect the extreme cold to be as dangerous as the extreme heat the area experienced this summer. She said the area has more warming centers than cooling centers. But she worries with climate change, the extremes could become more common.

"It becomes more and more dangerous to just accept a situation where we have thousands of people who don't have a place to live," said Steele. "So, we need to find solutions to that problem."

Steele added the solution is to build more affordable housing.

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HEADLINE	<b>12/24 Omicron dominant variant King Co.</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.king5.com/article/news/health/coronavirus/omicron-dominant-covid-variant-king-county/281-72a2e3d7-79ef-4a79-932e-ad266f1f8205">https://www.king5.com/article/news/health/coronavirus/omicron-dominant-covid-variant-king-county/281-72a2e3d7-79ef-4a79-932e-ad266f1f8205</a>
GIST	<p>SEATTLE — A Seattle hospital leader said Thursday that omicron has become the dominant <a href="#">coronavirus</a> variant in King County and much of western Washington.</p> <p>Dr. John Lynch, Harborview Medical Center's medical director for infection prevention and control, <a href="#">said in a statement</a> that the super-infectious omicron variant will soon overtake delta throughout the rest of the state.</p> <p>The omicron variant spreads more easily than other coronavirus strains, and federal health officials said Monday it is <a href="#">now the dominant version of the virus</a> in the U.S., accounting for 73% of new infections last week.</p> <p>"We're going to see [omicron] replace the delta strain in eastern Washington and north and south Washington here very soon," <a href="#">said Lynch</a>. "It moves incredibly quickly, and it's just a matter of days to weeks before that's the case."</p> <p>Lynch said healthy people who are fully vaccinated against the virus and have received a booster shot "should mostly expect cold-like symptoms" if they get sick from the omicron variant.</p> <p>Lynch urged anyone who tests positive for the virus, regardless of vaccination status or if they are experiencing symptoms, should reconsider attending any holiday gatherings.</p>

"I know how hard this is for everyone," said Lynch. "As someone who's been dealing with this, as someone who sees patients with this, as someone who's been working very hard for two years now to prevent new cases – if that happened to me, I would stay home if my antigen test was positive. Even if I had no symptoms, I would assume that that test is correct, given how much COVID there is out there."

Although some early reports say the omicron variant is less severe than previous variants, Washington state health officials continue to sound the alarm.

As Washington State Hospital Association (WSHA) Executive Vice President Taya Briley explained Thursday, the state and the rest of the country are faced with "[a math problem](#)" due to the apparent high transmissibility of the new variant.

"Even if most people don't get really sick, there are a lot of people who are getting infected with omicron, and some portion of them will get severely ill and need hospital care. Even if it's a small portion of the overall total, this could mean a huge number of people getting sick enough to need hospitalization," Briley said [during a WSHA briefing](#).

Many Washingtonians are using rapid at-home COVID-19 tests before gathering or traveling this holiday season to ensure they're not putting their loved ones at risk.

To help alert the public they might be a close contact, the [WA Notify app](#) is expanding its features to include results from at-home COVID-19 test results in its exposure notifications. The [new feature allows](#) those who test positive for COVID-19 with an at-home test to anonymously notify others about any potential exposure.

The WA Notify app works by giving those who receive a positive test result a verification code that is then reported to the Washington State Department of Health (DOH). The DOH said the new feature increases the number of people who can benefit from the app's notifications since it increases the number of tests it uses.

The new feature gives those who take at-home tests the option to get a verification code if they test positive.

Since the app was launched in November 2020, the DOH says more than 2.75 million people have enabled WA Notify on their phones. This equates to nearly 45% of all smartphone users in the state.

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HEADLINE	<b>12/24 Crowds, cancelations at SEA airport</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.kiro7.com/news/local/crowds-cancellations-meet-sea-airport-travelers/DYCQ6QW475AAXBBSAKNNA5UOVY/">https://www.kiro7.com/news/local/crowds-cancellations-meet-sea-airport-travelers/DYCQ6QW475AAXBBSAKNNA5UOVY/</a>
GIST	<p>SEATTLE — Port officials expect roughly 1 million travelers to pass through Sea-Tac Airport in the next two weeks.</p> <p>This holiday rush is standard. But what's proving challenging is the mounting cancellations — many of them from pinched airline staff due to COVID-19.</p> <p>"As winter weather impacts the northwest and northeast U.S. the omicron variant continues to surge, Delta teams exhausted all options and resources before canceling around 158 flights in Friday's nearly 3,100-flight schedule," said a Delta spokesperson in an email to KIRO 7.</p> <p>These numbers reflect cancellations nationwide.</p> <p>At Sea-Tac Airport, the website FlightAware reported 28 cancellations on Friday, and 43 cancellations are expected on Christmas Day.</p>



There are nearly 100 delays reported for each day.

The 28 cancellations represent just 2% of all flights through Sea-Tac on Friday.

Delta and United attribute many of their cancellations to staffing shortages from the rise of COVID-19 cases because of the omicron variant across the world.

KIRO 7 talked with two Chinese students whose Delta flight to Shanghai has been canceled twice this week.

“We’ve already been here for three days and like we really, really want to come back home desperately. And so far we don’t have solutions for alternative flights,” said one of the students, who asked for anonymity for fear of retribution.

KIRO 7 reached out to Delta about the issues associated with DL287 to Shanghai.

A Delta spokesperson told KIRO 7 the “cancellation of flight DL287 from Seattle to Shanghai is not related to the staff shortages from COVID-19 that is impacting hundreds of other flights across the country.”

Some passengers told KIRO 7 they already planning for contingency plans should their return flights be canceled next week.

“Actually, we talked about it before we came out. And we kind of made contingency plans, what we might do, who we might stay with,” said one dad who traveled with his family from Aberdeen.

TSA and Port of Seattle officials told KIRO 7 they are not experiencing staffing issues due to COVID-19.

Port officials said they have 85 pieces of snow-clearing equipment on standby should the weather worsen, as expected over the weekend.

Officials expect roughly 900,000 travelers to pass through SEA this week.

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HEADLINE	<b>12/24 State \$4M settlement foster abuse case</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.kiro7.com/news/local/washington-pay-4m-settlement-foster-abuse-case/CJ762D2XQFCULO5PB6BSHQWXP4/">https://www.kiro7.com/news/local/washington-pay-4m-settlement-foster-abuse-case/CJ762D2XQFCULO5PB6BSHQWXP4/</a>
GIST	<p>YAKIMA, Wash. — The state of Washington has agreed to a \$4 million settlement for two former foster children who were abused and sexually assaulted.</p> <p>The record-breaking settlement comes out of a sex abuse lawsuit for the two sisters, who were four and two when they were sexually assaulted.</p> <p>The lawsuit says they were placed in a foster home without safety monitoring for years. They were sexually abused from 2006 to 2015.</p> <p>Foster father Jose Cortez eventually pleaded guilty to first-degree child molestation.</p> <p>The two sisters testified, saying their foster mother would hit, starve and force them to take cold showers while Cortez sexually molested and raped them.</p>
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HEADLINE	<b>12/24 Cosmopolis loses all volunteer firefighters</b>
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SOURCE	<a href="https://komonews.com/news/local/western-washington-city-loses-all-12-volunteer-firefighters-in-mass-resignation">https://komonews.com/news/local/western-washington-city-loses-all-12-volunteer-firefighters-in-mass-resignation</a>
GIST	<p>COSMOPOLIS, Wash. - A city's entire fire department is resigning.</p> <p>The city of Cosmopolis in Grays Harbor County will be without its 12 volunteer firefighters starting Jan. 1, 2022.</p> <p>The Cosmopolis Volunteer Fire Association (CVFA) announced the mass resignation on Facebook Thursday, calling it necessary.</p> <p>According to a release, the department is upset at Cosmopolis Mayor Pauley, claiming he removed "necessary funding and leadership where it is most needed."</p> <p>"Your firefighters in no way want to leave this community unprotected, we are citizens ourselves with families and homes that need emergency medical and fire protection if those unforeseen circumstances arise, however, we cannot protect you while keeping ourselves safe in the current state Mayor Pauley and his colleagues have created," the letter reads.</p> <p>You can read the full announcement below.</p> <p>KOMO News spoke with Mayor Kyle Pauley for a response to the developing story.</p> <p>Pauley told us the timing of the resignation comes as a surprise.</p> <p>However, he knew this was a possibility over the past couple of years.</p> <p>"I had hoped that it wasn't something it would come to but this is not something that is completely out of left field," Pauley said. "The timing is most interesting and that's the hardest part."</p> <p>Pauley said he and the department have butted heads, but claims every decision he has made was for the good of the city and hopes they find a way to keep the city safe and keep the firefighters.</p> <p>"Obviously it's never a time for an announcement like this to happen that would be a good time," Pauley said. "This close to the holidays it kind of makes it a little tougher. It's a sad situation that it's come to this."</p> <p>The mayor does have a plan, saying he has spoken with Aberdeen about its emergency services helping out should this actually happen.</p> <p>"As soon as I saw the statement I started working to ensure the residents are going to be protected in the new year and so now we're just going through that, it kind of came down last night so we're still running through everything at the moment," Pauley said.</p>
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## Cyber Awareness

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HEADLINE	<b>12/24 Blister: evasive malware campaign</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://thehackernews.com/2021/12/new-blister-malware-using-code-signing.html">https://thehackernews.com/2021/12/new-blister-malware-using-code-signing.html</a>
GIST	Cybersecurity researchers have disclosed details of an evasive malware campaign that makes use of valid code signing certificates to sneak past security defenses and stay under the radar with the goal of deploying Cobalt Strike and BitRAT payloads on compromised systems.

	<p>The binary, a loader, has been dubbed "Blister" by researchers from Elastic Security, with the malware samples having <a href="#">negligible</a> to <a href="#">zero</a> detections on VirusTotal. As of writing, the infection vector used to stage the attack, as well as the ultimate objectives of the intrusion, remains unknown.</p> <p>A notable aspect of the attacks is that they leverage a valid code signing certificate issued by <a href="#">Sectigo</a>. The malware has been observed signed with the certificate in question dating back to September 15, 2021. Elastic said it reached out to the company to ensure that the abused certificates are revoked.</p> <p>"Executables with valid code signing certificates are often scrutinized to a lesser degree than unsigned executables," researchers Joe Desimone and Samir Bousseaden <a href="#">said</a>. "Their use allows attackers to remain under the radar and evade detection for a longer period of time."</p> <p>Blister masquerades as a legitimate library called "<a href="#">colorui.dll</a>" and is delivered via a dropper named "<a href="#">dxpo8umrzzrlw6gm.exe</a>." Post execution, the loader is designed to sleep for 10 minutes, likely in an attempt to evade sandbox analysis, only to follow it up by establishing persistence and decrypting an embedded malware payload such as <a href="#">Cobalt Strike</a> or <a href="#">BitRAT</a>.</p> <p>"Once decrypted, the embedded payload is loaded into the current process or injected into a newly spawned WerFault.exe [Windows Error Reporting] process," the researchers noted. Additional indicators of compromise (IoCs) associated with the campaign can be accessed <a href="#">here</a>.</p>
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HEADLINE	<b>12/24 New ransomware variants flourish</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://thehackernews.com/2021/12/new-ransomware-variants-flourish-amid.html">https://thehackernews.com/2021/12/new-ransomware-variants-flourish-amid.html</a>
GIST	<p>Ransomware groups continue to evolve their tactics and techniques to deploy file-encrypting malware on compromised systems, notwithstanding law enforcement's disruptive actions against the cybercrime gangs to prevent them from victimizing additional companies.</p> <p>"Be it due to law enforcement, infighting amongst groups or people abandoning variants altogether, the RaaS [ransomware-as-a-service] groups dominating the ecosystem at this point in time are completely different than just a few months ago," Intel 471 researchers <a href="#">said</a> in a report published this month. "Yet, even with the shift in the variants, ransomware incidents as a whole are still on the rise."</p> <p>Sweeping law enforcement operations <a href="#">undertaken by government agencies</a> in recent months have brought about rapid shifts in the RaaS landscape and turned the tables on ransomware syndicates like Avaddon, <a href="#">BlackMatter</a>, <a href="#">ClOp</a>, <a href="#">DarkSide</a>, Egregor, and <a href="#">REvil</a>, forcing the actors to slow down or shut down their businesses altogether.</p> <p>But just as these variants are fading into obscurity, other up-and-coming groups have stepped in to fill the vacuum. Intel 471's findings have uncovered a total of 612 ransomware attacks between July to September 2021 that can be attributed to 35 different ransomware variants.</p> <p>Roughly 60% of the observed infections were tied to four variants alone — topped by LockBit 2.0 (33%), <a href="#">Conti</a> (15.2%), BlackMatter (6.9%), and Hive (6%) — and primarily impacted manufacturing, consumer and industrial products, professional services and consulting, and real estate sectors.</p> <p><a href="#">Avos Locker</a> is one among the many such cartels that have not only witnessed a surge in attacks, but have also adopted new tactics to pursue their financially motivated schemes, chief among them being the ability to disable endpoint security products on the targeted systems and boot into Windows Safe Mode to execute the ransomware. Also installed is the AnyDesk remote administration tool to maintain access to the machine while running in Safe Mode.</p> <p>"The reason for this is that many, if not most, endpoint security products do not run in Safe Mode — a special diagnostic configuration in which Windows disables most third-party drivers and software, and can render otherwise protected machines unsafe," SophosLabs principal security researcher, Andrew</p>

Brandt, [said](#). "The techniques deployed by Avos Locker are simple yet clever, with attackers ensuring that the ransomware has the best chance of running in Safe Mode and allowing the attackers to retain remote access to the machines throughout the attack."

Hive's RaaS program, for its part, has been dubbed "aggressive" for its use of pressure tactics to make victim organizations pay ransoms, with Group-IB [linking](#) the strain to attacks on 355 companies as of October 16 since it emerged on the landscape in late June 2021. Meanwhile, Russian-language ransomware group Everest is taking its extortion tactics to the next level by threatening to sell off access to targeted systems if their demands aren't met, NCC Group said.

"While selling ransomware-as-a-service has seen a surge in popularity over the last year, this is a rare instance of a group forgoing a request for a ransom and offering access to IT infrastructure — but we may see copycat attacks in 2022 and beyond," the U.K.-based cybersecurity company [pointed out](#).

What's more, a relatively new ransomware family dubbed Pysa (aka Mespinoza) has unseated Conti as one of the top ransomware threat groups for the month of November alongside LockBit 2.0. The ransomware witnessed a 50% increase in the number of targeted companies and a 400% spike in attacks against government-sector systems when compared to the month of October.

"While law enforcement around the world has gotten more aggressive in their efforts to arrest those behind attacks, developers are still easily shutting down popular variants, laying low, and coming back with finely-tuned malware used by themselves as well as affiliates," Intel 471 researchers said. "As long as the developers can remain in countries where they are granted safe harbor, the attacks will continue, albeit with different variants."

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HEADLINE	<b>12/24 Unique cyberattacks fall; first time 3yrs</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.infosecurity-magazine.com/news/unique-cyber-attacks-fall/">https://www.infosecurity-magazine.com/news/unique-cyber-attacks-fall/</a>
GIST	<p>Unique cyber-attacks declined for the first time in nearly three years in Q3 2021, according to <a href="#">new data</a> from <a href="#">Positive Technologies</a>.</p> <p>The researchers observed a 4.8% decline in unique attacks in Q3 compared to the previous quarter, the first time they have recorded a reduction since the end of 2018. They said that this trend was primarily by a decline in ransomware attacks and the fact that a number of large cybercrime gangs have seen their activities curtailed by law enforcement. This includes successful actions against the notorious REvil ransomware group, which US authorities <a href="#">forced offline</a> in October.</p> <p>Positive Technologies recorded 45 ransomware attacks in September, representing a 63% reduction compared to the peak number of attacks in April (120).</p> <p>The decline in ransomware helped explain why attacks aimed at compromising corporate computers, servers and network equipment fell from 87% to 75% quarter-on-quarter, according to the authors.</p> <p>The report also noted a rebranding of a number of existing ransomware gangs in Q3. For example, some of these threat actors are rethinking their preference for ransomware-as-a-service (RaaS) due to concerns about relying on third parties.</p> <p>Ekaterina Kilyusheva, head of research and analytics at Positive Technologies, commented: "In Q2, we predicted that one of the possible scenarios of ransomware transformation would be that groups abandon the RaaS model in its current form. It is much safer for ransomware operators to hire people who will deliver malware and search for vulnerabilities as permanent 'employees.' It will be safer for both parties, as more organized and efficient all-in-one forms of cooperation can be created. In Q3, we saw the first steps in this direction. An additional boost for this transformation is the development of the market of initial access."</p>

	<p>While the overall malware attacks fell by 22% over this period, the analysis revealed a significant increase in the use of remote access Trojans, driven by attackers' growing desire to access data. In regard to attacks against organizations, the share of remote access Trojans increased from 17% to 36%. Against individuals, it made up over half of all used malware.</p> <p>Another notable trend outlined in the study was that the share of attacks conducted by APT groups rose to 5% in Q3. The researchers believe this is due to a large number of phishing and intelligence campaigns against employees of government agencies, industrial enterprises and media workers.</p>
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HEADLINE	<b>12/24 Albania PM issues data leak apology</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.infosecurity-magazine.com/news/albanias-prime-minister-issues/">https://www.infosecurity-magazine.com/news/albanias-prime-minister-issues/</a>
GIST	<p>The prime minister of Albania has issued a public apology after the personal data of hundreds of thousands of Albanian citizens was allegedly leaked online.</p> <p>An <a href="#">Excel file</a> containing what appears to be data relating to employees in the public and private sectors was found circulating on social media and has reportedly been broadly shared through messaging apps.</p> <p>Personal information allegedly exposed in the file includes the monthly salaries, job titles, employer names, and ID numbers of approximately 637,138 individuals.</p> <p>BIRN <a href="#">reports</a> that while an investigation by the Tirana Prosecutor's Office to verify the authenticity of the data remains ongoing, suspicions have been raised that the information was leaked from either Albania's tax service or its Social Insurance Institute.</p> <p>Speaking on Thursday, Albania's prime minister, Edi Rama, <a href="#">apologized</a> for the security incident. He said it did not appear to be the result of malicious action by an external threat actor.</p> <p>"According to a preliminary analysis, it looks more like an internal infiltration rather than an outside . . . cyber-attack," Rama told a press conference.</p> <p>He added: "I have an idea that this was done to create confusion and animosity between the people and (the government)."</p> <p>Government spokesman Endri Fuga said an initial examination of the file's contents suggested that the document had been formed through the "merger of several different pieces" of data. Fuga added that no digital export of the state payroll database had occurred.</p> <p>President Ilir Meta described the list's publication as "a flagrant violation of freedoms, human rights and dignity, laws and the constitution" and called for Albanian authorities to investigate the leak and discover who had executed it.</p> <p>Meta <a href="#">said</a>: "The personal data of every citizen, which is stored by public institutions and administered in state databases, is personal, protected by law and intended to be used only for the benefit of citizens and the state only.</p> <p>"Any other use of it is a criminal act, which endangers the social order by violating the private security of every citizen."</p> <p>The alleged data leak follows a similar security incident in <a href="#">April</a> in which the personal data of 910,000 voters in Tirana was exposed to the media.</p>
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HEADLINE	<b>12/24 Inetum Group hit by ransomware attack</b>
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SOURCE	<a href="https://www.bleepingcomputer.com/news/security/global-it-services-provider-inetum-hit-by-ransomware-attack/">https://www.bleepingcomputer.com/news/security/global-it-services-provider-inetum-hit-by-ransomware-attack/</a>
GIST	<p>Less than a week before the Christmas holiday, French IT services company Inetum Group was hit by a ransomware attack that had a limited impact on the business and its customers.</p> <p>Inetum is active in more than 26 countries, providing digital services to companies in various sectors: aerospace and defense, banking, automotive, energy and utilities, healthcare, insurance, retail, public sector, transportation, telecom and media.</p> <p><b>Limited impact</b></p> <p>As a services provider for a large number of companies and with a revenue of almost \$2 billion, the group is an attractive target for ransomware gangs.</p> <p>On Sunday, December 19, Inetum became the target of a ransomware attack that affected some of its operations in France and did not spread to larger infrastructures used by the customers.</p> <p>“None of the main infrastructures, communication, collaboration tools or delivery operations for Inetum clients has been affected,” the company assures in a <a href="#">press release</a> on Thursday.</p> <p>The Group’s crisis unit acted quickly to protect sensitive connections that could put clients at risk if compromised. To this end, the operational teams isolated all servers on the affected network and terminated client VPN connections.</p> <p>An initial investigation determined the ransomware strain used in the attack and that the recent critical Log4j vulnerability was not exploited during the incident.</p> <p>Inetum Group did not disclose the name of the malware used but according to <a href="#">Valéry Marchive</a>, editor-in-chief at French publication LeMagIt, the <a href="#">attackers used BlackCat ransomware</a>, also known as ALPHV and Noberus.</p> <p>The file-encrypting malware is written in Rust, which is atypical for ransomware operations and has been used in attacks since at least November 18, as <a href="#">discovered by researchers at Symantec</a>, a Broadcom company.</p> <p>BlackCat has <a href="#">plenty of advanced features</a> and comes with a very flexible configuration that allows it to spread to other computers, terminate virtual machines and ESXi hypervisors, as well as wipe them.</p> <p>Inetum Group has notified authorities about the attack and is collaborating with specialized cybercrime units. A third party has also been called in for incident response services.</p> <p>At the moment, delivery operations to customers are safe, and messaging and collaboration systems remain unaffected, the company notes.</p>
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HEADLINE	<b>12/24 New Rook ransomware overlaps w/Babuk</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.bleepingcomputer.com/news/security/rook-ransomware-is-yet-another-spawn-of-the-leaked-babuk-code/">https://www.bleepingcomputer.com/news/security/rook-ransomware-is-yet-another-spawn-of-the-leaked-babuk-code/</a>
GIST	<p>A new ransomware operation named Rook has appeared recently on the cyber-crime space, declaring a desperate need to make "a lot of money" by breaching corporate networks and encrypting devices.</p> <p>Although the introductory statements on their data leak portal were marginally funny, the first victim announcements on the site have made it clear that Rook is not playing games.</p> <p>Researchers at SentinelLabs have taken a deep dive into the new strain, revealing its technical details, infection chain, and how it overlaps with the Babuk ransomware.</p>



### Infection process

The Rook ransomware payload is usually delivered via Cobalt Strike, with phishing emails and shady torrent downloads being reported as the initial infection vector.

The payloads are packed with UPX or other crypters to help evade detection. When executed, the ransomware attempts to terminate processes related to security tools or anything that could interrupt the encryption.

"Interestingly, we see the kph.sys driver from Process Hacker come into play in process termination in some cases but not others," SentinelLabs explains in [its report](#).

"This likely reflects the attacker's need to leverage the driver to disable certain local security solutions on specific engagements."

Rook also uses vssadmin.exe to delete volume shadow copies, a standard tactic used by ransomware operations to prevent shadow volumes from being [used to recover files](#).

Analysts have found no persistence mechanisms, so Rook will encrypt the files, append the ".Rook" extension and then delete itself from the compromised system.

### Based on Babuk

SentinelLabs has found numerous code similarities between Rook and Babuk, a defunct RaaS that had its complete [source code leaked](#) on a Russian-speaking forum in September 2021.

For example, Rook uses the same API calls to retrieve the name and status of each running service and the same functions to terminate them.

Also, the list of processes and Windows services that are stopped are the same for both ransomware. This includes the Steam gaming platform, the Microsoft Office and Outlook email client, and Mozilla Firefox and Thunderbird.

Other similarities include how the encryptor deletes shadow volume copies, uses the Windows Restart Manager API, and enumerates local drives.

Due to these code similarities, Sentinel One believes that Rook is based on the leaked source code for the Babuk Ransomware operation.

### Is Rook a serious threat?

While it is too soon to tell how sophisticated Rook's attacks are, the consequences of an infection are still severe, leading to encrypted and stolen data.

The Rook data leak site currently contains two victims, a bank and an Indian aviation and aerospace specialist.

Both were added this month, so we are at an early stage in the group's activities.

If skilled affiliates join the new RaaS, Rook could become a significant threat in the future.

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HEADLINE	12/24 Trojan spreads via fake Play Store page
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.bleepingcomputer.com/news/security/android-banking-trojan-spreads-via-fake-google-play-store-page/?&amp;web_view=true">https://www.bleepingcomputer.com/news/security/android-banking-trojan-spreads-via-fake-google-play-store-page/?&amp;web_view=true</a>
GIST	An Android banking trojan targeting Itaú Unibanco, a large financial services provider in Brazil with 55 million customers globally, has deployed an unusual trick to spread to devices.

The actors have set up a page that looks very close to Android's official Google Play app store to trick visitors into thinking they are installing the app from a trustworthy service.

The malware pretends to be the official banking app for Itaú Unibanco and features the same icon as the legitimate app.

If the user clicks on the "Install" button, they are offered to download the APK, which is the first sign of the scam. Google Play Store apps are installed through the store interface, never asking the user to download and install programs manually.

### **Hijacking the actual app**

Researchers at [Cyble](#) analyzed the malware, finding that upon execution, it attempts to open the real Itaú app from the actual Play Store.

If that succeeds, it uses the actual app to perform fraudulent transactions by changing the user's input fields.

The app doesn't request any dangerous permissions during installation, thus avoiding raising suspicious or risking detection from AV tools.

Instead, it aims to leverage the Accessibility Service, which is all that's needed by mobile malware to bypass all security on Android systems.

As a recent report by [Security Research Labs](#) explains, we are dealing with an Android malware Accessibility abuse pandemic right now, and Google is yet to plug the targeted weak spot.

As such, only the user has the chance to spot the signs of abuse and stop the malware before it gets a chance to perform destructive actions on the device.

These signs come in the form of the app requesting permission to perform gestures, retrieve window content, and observe user actions.

The websites used to distribute the malicious APKs have been reported and taken offline for now, but the actors may return through different domains.

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HEADLINE	<b>12/24 Phishing taunts: funeral helpline number</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.bleepingcomputer.com/news/security/dridex-omicron-phishing-taunts-with-funeral-helpline-number/?&amp;web_view=true">https://www.bleepingcomputer.com/news/security/dridex-omicron-phishing-taunts-with-funeral-helpline-number/?&amp;web_view=true</a>
GIST	<p>A malware distributor for the Dridex banking malware has been toying with victims and researchers over the last few weeks. The latest example is a phishing campaign that taunts victims with a COVID-19 funeral assistance helpline number.</p> <p>Dridex is banking malware distributed through phishing emails containing malicious Word or Excel attachments. When these attachments are opened, and macros are enabled, the malware will be downloaded and installed on the victim's device.</p> <p>Once installed, Dridex will attempt to steal online banking credentials, spread to other machines, and potentially provide remote network access for ransomware attacks.</p> <p><b>COVID-19 Omicron variant used as a lure</b></p> <p>Over the past few weeks, one of the Dridex phishing email distributors is having fun toying with victims and researchers.</p>

This was first seen when the threat actor [began trolling security researchers](#) by using their names combined with racist comments as malware file names and email addresses.

Earlier this week, the threat actor [spammed fake employee termination letters](#) that displayed an alert stating, "Merry X-Mas Dear Employees!", after infecting their device.

In a new phishing campaign discovered by [MalwareHunterTeam](#) and [604Kuzushi](#), this same threat actor took it to the next level by spamming emails with a subject of "COVID-19 testing result" that states the recipient was exposed to a coworker who tested positive to the Omicron COVID-19 variant.

"This letter is to inform you that you have been exposed to a coworker who tested positive for OMICRON variant of COVID-19 sometime between December 18th and 20th," reads the new phishing email...

"Please take a look at the details in the attached document."

The email includes a password-protected Excel attachment and the password needed to open the document. Once the password is entered, the recipient is shown a blurred COVID-19 document and is prompted to 'Enable Content' to view it.

To add insult to injury, after macros are enabled, and the device becomes infected, the threat actor taunts their victims by displaying an alert containing the phone number for the "COVID-19 Funeral Assistance Helpline."

With the COVID-19 variant being highly contagious and rapidly spreading worldwide, phishing emails about the [Omicron variant are becoming popular](#) and are likely highly effective in distributing malware.

This is especially true if the phishing campaign pretends to be from a company's human resources department and targets employees from the same company.

As Dridex phishing campaigns are currently using password-protected attachments, enterprises need to train their employees to spot and avoid these types of attacks.

As always, if you receive unexpected emails or one that contains unusual attachments, always reach out to your network admin or other people in the workplace to determine if the email is legitimate.

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HEADLINE	<b>12/26 TikTok self-diagnosis videos impact teens</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.wsj.com/articles/tiktok-diagnosis-videos-leave-some-teens-thinking-they-have-rare-mental-disorders-11640514602?mod=hp_lead_pos9">https://www.wsj.com/articles/tiktok-diagnosis-videos-leave-some-teens-thinking-they-have-rare-mental-disorders-11640514602?mod=hp_lead_pos9</a>
GIST	<p>Samantha Fridley would stay up until 3 a.m. watching an endless stream of TikTok videos about borderline-personality disorder, bipolar disorder and multiple-personality disorder.</p> <p>Many videos were from teens or young adults who said they had these diagnoses. Others were from people claiming to be therapists. They often mention signs they say could be symptoms of these conditions, and encourage viewers to do their own self-evaluation.</p> <p>Ms. Fridley, a high-school senior in Shenandoah Junction, W.Va., was diagnosed with anxiety and depression at age 10. She recognized herself in the descriptions of the disorders and became convinced at different times that she had each of them. Other teens I spoke to said the same thing.</p> <p>TikTok videos containing the hashtag #borderlinepersonalitydisorder have been viewed almost 600 million times. Only 1.4% of the U.S. adult population <a href="#">is estimated to experience the disorder</a>, according to the National Alliance on Mental Illness, a nonprofit mental-health advocacy organization. Borderline-personality disorder is almost never diagnosed in adolescents, because their personalities are still forming</p>

and because some symptoms, such as having unstable personal relationships and exhibiting impulsive behavior, are hard to distinguish from typical teen behavior, doctors say.

Multiple-personality (aka dissociative-identity) disorder [is even rarer](#), affecting less than 1% of the population, according to the Cleveland Clinic. Videos containing the hashtag #dissociativeidentitydisorder have been viewed well over 700 million times on TikTok. Many of the videos feature teens and young adults as they appear to switch from one personality to another.

When teens watch TikTok videos and decide they have a mental-health affliction—even if they're really only suffering from adolescence—it can pose a treatment challenge and cause frayed family relationships. Psychologists say there are things parents should and shouldn't do when confronting their self-diagnosing teen, which I'll discuss below. For its part, TikTok, owned by Beijing-based ByteDance Ltd., is implementing changes that could minimize streams of single-topic videos.

### **'A social currency'**

"It can be tricky when there's a strong clinging to a particular diagnosis," said Bre-Ann Slay, a clinical psychologist in Kansas City, Mo. TikTok videos that de-stigmatize mental illness and lead some teens to seek help can be positive, she added, but only up to a point.

This past summer at an inpatient child-psychiatric facility, Dr. Slay began seeing several patients a week who were self-diagnosing. When they mentioned they were learning about the conditions on TikTok, Dr. Slay created a TikTok account to understand what they were watching.

"What shocked me the most was how many videos there were about multiple-personality disorder because of how rare it is," she said.

She and other doctors around the country say they're seeing more teens coming in with self-diagnoses derived from TikTok. The video platform has [overtaken Instagram in popularity](#) among teens this year, according to a recent report from [Forrester Research](#) Inc., a market research firm. This year, 63% of U.S. 12- to 17-year-olds [used TikTok every week](#), up from 50% in 2020. The percentage of kids in that age group who used [Meta Platforms](#) Inc.'s [FB 1.45%](#) Instagram each week fell to 57% from 61% in 2020.

"We have to convince these kids to release their self-diagnoses but when they leave us they go right back into that TikTok community which reinforces their beliefs," said Don Grant, executive director of outpatient services for Newport Healthcare's teen treatment center in Santa Monica, Calif. He hasn't kept a tally of the teens who use TikTok to self-diagnose but said it's significant.

Dr. Grant, who chairs a committee of the American Psychological Association that develops guidance for psychologists and the public on device and social-media use, explained that [being saturated with negative content](#) can alter the brain's chemistry, displacing feel-good neurotransmitters with stress hormones.

"What happens is adrenaline and cortisol flood your brain, and dopamine and serotonin leave the building," he said.

Some therapists are going on TikTok to combat misinformation about mental-health conditions. Evan Lieberman, a clinical social worker in Minneapolis, has amassed more than a million followers on TikTok; [in some videos](#), he pokes fun at all the self-diagnosis questions he gets.

"Despite how great the newfound mental-health awareness is among teens, there seems to be a trend of using mental-health diagnoses as a social currency," he said.

### **The algorithm**

Ms. Fridley, the high-school student, said she didn't seek out videos about mental-health diagnoses. After she started following some mental-health advocacy accounts on TikTok, she said, the social-media app began serving up videos about various disorders.

Ms. Fridley, who also followed K-pop stars and comedy accounts, said her For You page became overrun with videos about mental-health disorders. A recent Wall Street Journal investigation showed that TikTok's algorithm [picked up on subtle cues](#) from users, such as how long they lingered on a video, and then showed them more and more of the same content.

Many teens have said constant TikTok videos about extreme dieting and exercise [contributed to eating disorders](#). Others developed physical tics after watching video streams of influencers who [said they had Tourette syndrome](#).

TikTok earlier this month said it is [testing changes to its algorithm](#) to steer viewers away from too much of one type of content. Currently, TikTok users can select "not interested" on a video if they don't want to watch more videos from a particular creator. The app maker said it is also working on a new feature that would allow people to choose words or hashtags associated with content they don't want in their feeds.

"We care deeply about the well-being of our community, which is why we continue to invest in digital-literacy education aimed at helping people evaluate and understand content they engage with online," a TikTok spokeswoman said. "We strongly encourage individuals to seek professional medical advice if they are in need of support."

### **'It really messed with my head'**

Over the course of a year, Ms. Fridley thought she had a different diagnosis every couple of weeks. She jotted them down in her journal, told her parents and brought them up in weekly sessions with her therapist.

Her father, John Fridley, was skeptical of her changing self-diagnoses, but said the family was careful not to dismiss her.

"We felt for a long time that we were competing with social media," Mr. Fridley said. "For any child with mental-health issues, to be alone in their room with their thoughts and with TikTok is a dangerous combination."

In April, Ms. Fridley, now 18, entered a Newport Academy residential treatment program in Virginia for her anxiety and depression. She said the conditions worsened during the pandemic, when she was attending school remotely and watching a lot of TikTok.

"It really messed with my head," she said.

The therapist Ms. Fridley saw at Newport explained to her that relating to some symptoms of a disorder doesn't qualify someone for a diagnosis. Ms. Fridley said she eventually came to accept that the only conditions she had were depression and anxiety.

Having a break from social media during her 54 days in the device-free residential program helped.

"It was the best feeling ever not to have my phone with me," she said.

Before she was discharged in May, Ms. Fridley, her family and her therapist agreed on rules to follow at home. Ms. Fridley suggested that she stay off her phone for three months. She eventually began watching TikTok again, but reduced the amount of time she spent on the app and clicked "not interested" on videos about mental-health diagnoses. She said it took about a month for the mental-health videos to disappear completely.

### **What you can do**

If your child comes to you with a self-diagnosis, there are some things medical professionals say you should and shouldn't do.

	<p>Listen. Therapists say it's best not to dismiss what your child has to say or to show emotion right away, because doing so can cause kids to shut down. Dr. Slay suggests asking kids why they think they have a certain condition and if they'd like to talk to someone about it. Sometimes the queries will pass, but if a child continues talking about a diagnosis, <a href="#">booking an appointment with a professional</a> can help.</p> <p>Take a break. Sometimes just stepping away from social media for a while, the way Ms. Fridley did, can allow for a new perspective.</p> <p>Start over. Dr. Grant said some of his teen patients have deleted their TikTok accounts and started over with new ones, because their feeds became saturated with negative content. Starting over and consciously choosing positive content can help.</p>
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HEADLINE	<b>12/25 Russia blocks rights monitor website</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.timesofisrael.com/russia-blocks-rights-monitor-website-for-promoting-terrorism/">https://www.timesofisrael.com/russia-blocks-rights-monitor-website-for-promoting-terrorism/</a>
GIST	<p>MOSCOW (AFP) — Russia has blocked the website of a rights monitor tracking political persecution, saying it promoted terrorism and extremism, amid an unprecedented official crackdown on dissent.</p> <p>The move comes in a year that has seen the opposition dismantled and scores of independent media and rights groups branded as “foreign agents” or banned outright.</p> <p>OVD-Info, which tracks opposition protests and also provides legal support to victims of political persecution, said the Roskomnadzor media regulator had blocked its website earlier this week.</p> <p>“At the moment, we have not received a notice and do not know the reason for being blocked,” the group tweeted.</p> <p>A Roskomnadzor registry of blocked websites showed that a Moscow region court had issued a ruling dated December 20 to “limit” access to the site.</p> <p>Later Saturday, Russian news agencies cited Roskomnadzor as confirming that it had blocked OVD-Info’s website because the Moscow region court had ruled that the group’s activities were aimed at promoting “terrorism and extremism” in Russia.</p> <p>Roskomnadzor added that it had sent “demands” to social media networks to “delete the organization’s accounts.”</p> <p>The pressure on social media companies to remove OVD-Info from their platforms comes after a Moscow court on Friday slapped Google with an unprecedented fine of nearly \$100 million, while Meta (formerly Facebook) received a fine of \$27 million for failing to remove banned content.</p> <p>Roskomnadzor said the United States companies had “ignored multiple demands” to remove materials that incite religious hatred and promote views of “extremist and terrorist organizations,” among other violations.</p> <p>‘Political pressure’</p> <p>OVD-Info, which was founded a decade ago during the first mass protests against Russian President Vladimir Putin’s rule in December 2011, had been labeled a “foreign agent” in September.</p> <p>Carrying negative Stalin-era connotations, entities or individuals identified as “foreign agents” must accompany all their texts, videos and social media posts with a disclaimer.</p> <p>The label is a deterrent for advertisers and makes it difficult for organizations and journalists to function.</p> <p>OVD-Info, which led a campaign against the legislation, denounced the move as “an act of political pressure.”</p>



The “foreign agent” label has been used in particular against journalists, with the justice ministry’s list of individuals and news outlets ballooning from 17 at the start of the year to 103 as of Saturday.

Critics point to a decision by Putin’s top domestic opponent Alexei Navalny to return to Russia in January as triggering the historic clampdown.

The 45-year-old opposition leader had been in Germany recovering from a near-fatal poisoning attack he blames on Putin — a claim the Kremlin has repeatedly denied.

Navalny was jailed soon after his return on old fraud charges and has since seen his organizations banned as “extremist” and all of his top allies flee the country.

Asked about the crackdown on Thursday, Putin said that it was aimed at curbing foreign influence.

“I remind you of what our adversaries have been saying for centuries: Russia cannot be defeated, it can only be destroyed from within,” he told a press conference.

He added that it was domestic dissent that brought about the collapse of the Soviet Union 30 years ago this month.

Also this month, Russia’s Supreme Court is considering whether to shut the country’s most prominent rights organization Memorial, which works with OVD-Info.

Prosecutors accuse the rights group of breaching “foreign agent” legislation and justifying terrorism by releasing lists of political prisoners that include banned figures like Navalny.

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HEADLINE	<b>12/24 Russia court hits Google, Facebook w/fines</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2021/dec/24/russian-court-hammers-google-facebook-huge-fines-c/">https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2021/dec/24/russian-court-hammers-google-facebook-huge-fines-c/</a>
GIST	<p>A Russian court on Friday slapped the parent companies of Google and Facebook with record-high fines for failing to take down content that the Kremlin deemed illegal.</p> <p>Alphabet Inc., the parent company of Google, was ordered to shell out nearly \$100 million. It was the highest penalty levied to date by Moscow’s internet regulator in an ongoing crackdown on Western tech companies.</p> <p>Meta, which is the new corporate name for Facebook, was fined close to \$27 million by the Russian court.</p> <p>Roskomnadzor, the Kremlin’s internet watchdog, said Facebook and Instagram failed to remove more than 2,000 posts that incite “religious discord,” perpetuate “unreliable socially significant information,” propagandize “an indifferent attitude towards the life and health of minors,” or promote extremism.</p> <p>The agency found more than 2,600 instances of similar violations in data housed by Google.</p> <p>Google told Reuters that it reviewing the court’s ruling and will determine its next steps. Meta did not respond to a request for comment.</p> <p>The tech giants could face additional fines should they fail to comply with orders to takedown disputed content.</p> <p>The fines, which have increased in severity over the past year, are part of a growing feud between Russia and foreign dot coms over content from protests and other material that have been unauthorized in the country.</p> <p>Moscow has also called on the tech giants to remove apps that it says violate Russia’s data storage laws.</p>

## Terror Conditions

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HEADLINE	<b>12/26 Houthis release 70% Al-Qaeda prisoners</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://english.aawsat.com/home/article/3379326/houthis-release-70-al-qaeda-prisoners">https://english.aawsat.com/home/article/3379326/houthis-release-70-al-qaeda-prisoners</a>
GIST	<p>Houthis released 70 percent of al-Qaeda's top members detained in prisons, which threatens civilians and constitutes a blow to international efforts to combat terrorism, according to a recent study by the Sanaa Center.</p> <p>The study stated Houthis released over 400 prisoners in an exchange deal, which contributed to strengthening the ranks of the extremist organization and helped it overcome the recruitment crisis.</p> <p>According to the study, the remaining Qaeda detainees are among the lowest-ranking members in the chain of command.</p> <p>Furthermore, the Qaeda militant group no longer raids the prisons to release its members after Houthis responded to their requests, considering the prisoner exchange an excellent way to secure the freedom of their militants, regardless of international concerns.</p> <p>The study showed that the militia did not object to any of the names provided by the Qaeda during negotiations, which only focused on the numbers of the prisoners.</p> <p>During the talks, Qaeda requested the release of 20 members in exchange for releasing one Houthi prisoner, who belongs to the Houthi family.</p> <p>In addition, the organization succeeded in liberating the fourth top leader in its Egyptian organization, al-Masry Saif al-Adl, detained in Iran since 2003, in exchange for the release of Iranian diplomat Nour Ahmad Nikbakht, who was kidnapped in 2012 by al-Qaeda in Yemen.</p> <p>The study quoted al-Qaeda sources as saying that Nikbakht's release was, in fact, part of a tripartite deal that included Qaeda, the Houthi authorities, and Iran, in which many Qaeda leaders in Sanaa were released.</p> <p>In April 2016, the Houthi militia conducted an exchange with Ansar al-Sharia, Qaeda's local wing in Yemen, to release 100 prisoners. The organization is classified on the global terrorism list.</p> <p>Last July, the two groups exchanged four prisoners from both sides. Houthis handed over Qaeda leaders Aidarous al-Masoudi and Abdullah al-Masoudi, detained in the National Security Prison since before the coup.</p> <p>Tribal and governmental sources say that the Houthi militia provided unlimited support to the Qaeda group since its coup in 2014 by releasing its leaders and members from intelligence prisons in exchange deals.</p> <p>Researchers believe that the rise of the Houthis has turned Yemen into a fertile environment for polarization on a sectarian basis. It also escalated with their calls for resistance on religious grounds.</p> <p>Qaeda took advantage of the widespread anger and the reaction to the militias' practices and was able to attract different groups to its ranks.</p>
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HEADLINE	<b>12/26 Extremists kill 41 in Burkina Faso ambush</b>
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SOURCE	<a href="https://abcnews.go.com/International/wireStory/41-killed-burkina-faso-ambush-including-volunteer-leader-81946115">https://abcnews.go.com/International/wireStory/41-killed-burkina-faso-ambush-including-volunteer-leader-81946115</a>
GIST	<p>OUAGADOUGOU, Burkina Faso -- Islamic extremists killed 41 people last week in an attack in northern Burkina Faso, including the prominent leader of a volunteer group helping the country's military, the government said.</p> <p>Alkassoum Maiga, the government spokesman, announced two days of mourning following the deadly ambush on a convoy in Loroum province on Thursday.</p> <p>Among the victims was Soumaila Ganame, also known as Ladji Yoro. Burkina Faso's President Roch Marc Christian Kabore said Ganame had died for his country and "must be a model of our determined commitment to fight the enemy."</p> <p>The death of Burkina Faso's most important volunteer leader has created a sense of panic, said Heni Nsaibia, a senior researcher at the Armed Conflict Location &amp; Event Data Project.</p> <p>"While Ganame achieved legendary status as a popular counter-insurgent who played a central role in mobilizing (volunteers) in Loroum and Yatenga, he was also the embodiment of the absent state," he said.</p> <p>Violence in the once-peaceful West African nation is escalating as attacks linked to al-Qaida and the Islamic State increase. More than 50 gendarmes were killed in November in the largest attack on the country's security forces in recent memory and at least 160 civilians were massacred in the Sahel region in June.</p> <p>Even though Burkina Faso's security forces are conducting the most operations compared to its neighbors in the volatile Sahel region, the army is overstretched, putting out one fire at a time, Nsaibia said.</p> <p>Volunteer fighters have been accused of committing some human rights abuses against those suspected of fighting with the jihadis, but also have become the targets of attacks.</p> <p>The government is facing calls to step down amid its inability to stop the violence, with weeks of protests taking place in November. In response, the president fired his prime minister this month.</p>
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HEADLINE	<b>12/26 Congo officials fear more attacks</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://abcnews.go.com/International/wireStory/suicide-bombing-east-congo-mayor-fears-attacks-81946096">https://abcnews.go.com/International/wireStory/suicide-bombing-east-congo-mayor-fears-attacks-81946096</a>
GIST	<p>BENI, Congo -- Authorities in eastern Congo announced an evening curfew and new security checkpoints Sunday, fearing more violence after a suicide bomber killed five people in the first attack of its kind in the region.</p> <p>Beni Mayor Narcisse Muteba, a police colonel, warned hotels, churches and bars in the town of Beni that they needed to add security guards with metal detectors because "terrorists" could strike again.</p> <p>"We are asking people to be vigilant and to avoid public places during this festive period," Muteba told The Associated Press on Sunday.</p> <p>Brig. Gen. Constant Ndimba, the military governor of North Kivu province, said there will be a 7 p.m. curfew, as well as more road checkpoints.</p> <p>Officials initially said the death toll was six plus the suicide bomber, but they revised that figure a day later to five victims. Thirteen others remained hospitalized after the blast at the entrance to the Inbox restaurant on Christmas Day.</p>

	<p>Saturday's bloodshed dramatically deepened fears that Islamic extremism has taken hold in Beni. The town already has suffered years of attacks by rebels from the Allied Democratic Forces, or ADF, who trace their origins to neighboring Uganda.</p> <p>Officials have blamed the latest attack on those rebels, whose exact links to international extremist groups have been murky. The Islamic State's Central Africa Province has claimed responsibility for attacks blamed on ADF, but it is unknown what role exactly the larger organization may have played in organizing and financing the attacks.</p> <p>There have been worrying signs that religious extremism was escalating around Beni: Two local imams were killed earlier this year within weeks of each other, one of whom had spoken out against the ADF.</p> <p>Then in June, the Islamic State group's Central Africa Province claimed responsibility for a suicide bomber who blew himself up near a bar in Beni without harming others. Another explosion that same day at a Catholic church wounded two people.</p> <p>There was no immediate claim of responsibility for Saturday's attack, in which authorities say the bomber ultimately was stopped from entering the crowded restaurant. After the blast near the entrance, blood stained the pavement and mangled chairs lay strewn near the entrance.</p> <p>Rachel Magali, who had been at the restaurant with her sister-in-law and several others, described hearing a loud noise and then people starting to cry.</p> <p>"We rushed to the exit where I saw people lying down," she told the AP. "There were green plastic chairs scattered everywhere and I also saw heads and arms no longer attached. It was really horrible."</p>
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HEADLINE	<b>12/26 Taliban dissolves commissions, ministries</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://abcnews.go.com/International/wireStory/taliban-run-government-dissolves-afghan-election-commissions-81943350">https://abcnews.go.com/International/wireStory/taliban-run-government-dissolves-afghan-election-commissions-81943350</a>
GIST	<p>ISLAMABAD -- The Taliban dissolved Afghanistan's two <a href="#">election</a> commissions as well as the state ministries for peace and parliamentary affairs, an official said Sunday.</p> <p>Bilal Karimi, deputy spokesman for Afghanistan's Taliban-run government, said the country's Independent Election Commission and Electoral Complaint Commission have been dissolved.</p> <p>He called them "unnecessary institutes for the current situation in Afghanistan." He said if there is a need for the commissions in the future, the Taliban government can revive them.</p> <p>The international community is waiting before extending formal recognition to Afghanistan's new rulers. They are wary the Taliban could impose a similarly harsh regime as when they were in power 20 years ago — despite their assurances to the contrary.</p> <p>Both <a href="#">election</a>s commissions were mandated to administer and supervise all types of elections in the country, including presidential, parliamentary and provincial council elections.</p> <p>Karimi said the Taliban also dissolved the Ministry for Peace and the Ministry of Parliamentary Affairs. He said they were unnecessary ministries in the government's current structure.</p> <p>The Taliban had previously shut down the former Women's Affairs Ministry.</p>
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HEADLINE	<b>12/25 Eastern Congo: suicide bomber kills 6</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/dec/25/suicide-bomber-kills-at-least-six-in-eastern-congo-on-christmas-day">https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/dec/25/suicide-bomber-kills-at-least-six-in-eastern-congo-on-christmas-day</a>

GIST	<p>A suicide bomber attacked a restaurant and bar in Beni on Christmas Day, killing at least six people in the eastern Congolese town <a href="#">where Islamic extremists are known to be active</a>.</p> <p>Heavy gunfire rang out shortly after the bomb went off, with panicked crowds fleeing the town's hub.</p> <p>Gen Sylvain Ekenge, spokesperson for the governor of North Kivu, said security guards had blocked the bomber from entering the crowded bar and so the person detonated the explosives at the entrance.</p> <p>"We call on people to remain vigilant and to avoid crowded areas during the holiday season," he said. "In the city and territory of Beni, it is difficult, in these times, to know who is who."</p> <p>Rachel Magali had been at the restaurant-bar for about three hours with her sister-in-law and several others when she heard a loud noise outside.</p> <p>"Suddenly we saw black smoke surrounding the bar and people started to cry," she told the Associated Press. "We rushed to the exit where I saw people lying down. There were green plastic chairs scattered everywhere and I also saw heads and arms no longer attached. It was really horrible."</p> <p>Among the dead were two children, according to Mayor Narcisse Muteba, who is also a police colonel. At least 13 other people were wounded and taken to a local hospital.</p> <p>"Investigations are under way to find the perpetrators of this terrorist attack," he told AP.</p> <p>The town has long been targeted by rebels from the Allied Democratic Forces (ADF), a group that traces its origins to neighbouring Uganda. But an <a href="#">Islamic State</a> affiliate claimed responsibility for two explosions in Beni in June, deepening fears that religious extremism has taken hold there too.</p> <p>Those explosions included the first known suicide bombing in eastern Congo, a Ugandan man who blew himself up outside a bar.</p> <p>The Islamist group's Central <a href="#">Africa</a> province later said that the suicide bomber was targeting Christians. The other explosion that day went off inside a Catholic church, wounding two people.</p> <p>Residents of the town have repeatedly expressed anger over the ongoing insecurity despite an army offensive and the presence of UN peacekeepers in Beni.</p> <p>In recent years, the town has also suffered an Ebola epidemic and has seen several smaller outbreaks of the disease.</p>
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HEADLINE	<b>12/25 Uganda charges 15 over deadly bombings</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.citizen.co.za/news/news-world/news-africa/2948384/uganda-charges-15-with-terrorism-over-deadly-bombings/">https://www.citizen.co.za/news/news-world/news-africa/2948384/uganda-charges-15-with-terrorism-over-deadly-bombings/</a>
GIST	<p>Uganda has charged 15 people, including a pregnant woman, with terrorism over their alleged role in recent attacks blamed on a rebel group, police said Friday.</p> <p>Uganda was hit by a series of bombings in October and November that killed five people and injured dozens.</p> <p>Ugandan authorities said a "domestic terror group" with ties to the Allied Democratic Forces (ADF) — a militant outfit which Washington has linked to the Islamic State — was responsible for the attacks.</p> <p>"Fifteen people appeared before court yesterday on charges of terrorism, aiding, abetting terrorism and belonging to a terrorist group," Kampala's Metropolitan Police deputy spokesman, Luke Owoyesigire, told AFP Friday.</p>

	<p>Following the attacks, Uganda last month deployed forces and launched air and artillery strikes in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) against the ADF, after Kinshasa gave Kampala approval to pursue the militants on its soil.</p> <p>Twin suicide bombings on November 16 in the capital Kampala left four people dead and 33 wounded.</p> <p>The attacks, claimed by IS, came on the heels of a bombing at a roadside eatery on October 23 that killed one woman, and a suicide blast on a bus near Kampala on October 25 that wounded several people.</p> <p>Police spokesman Owoyesigire said all 15 suspects were involved in the four bombings and will remain in custody until January 13 when they will appear in court again.</p> <p>Since April 2019, some ADF attacks in eastern DR Congo have been claimed by IS, which describes the group as its Islamic State Central Africa Province offshoot.</p> <p>In March, the United States placed the ADF on its list of “terrorist” organisations linked to IS.</p> <p>Uganda has also blamed the group for a foiled bomb attack in August on the funeral of an army commander who led a major offensive against Al-Shabaab militants in Somalia.</p>
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HEADLINE	<b>12/24 Taliban outwitted, outwaited US</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.wsj.com/articles/how-the-afghanistan-taliban-outwitted-and-outwaited-the-u-s-11640355270?mod=hp_lead_pos11">https://www.wsj.com/articles/how-the-afghanistan-taliban-outwitted-and-outwaited-the-u-s-11640355270?mod=hp_lead_pos11</a>
GIST	<p>Taliban delegates and representatives of the U.S.-backed Afghan republic <a href="#">gathered for a secret retreat</a> in a château north of Paris in December 2012, raising hopes that a peace deal could end their intractable war.</p> <p>The Taliban, whose fighters had been beaten back by <a href="#">President Obama’s troop surge</a>, dined on pork-free French cuisine with Afghan warlords, civil-society activists and female parliamentarians. At a formal session in the Chantilly hideaway, the emissaries distributed a message on behalf of the movement’s founding leader, the one-eyed cleric Mullah Mohammad Omar.</p> <p>The Taliban won’t seek to rule Afghanistan on their own anymore, the document assured, and a new constitution “would pave the way for power-sharing in the next government.” When the republic’s delegates returned to Kabul, many enthused about how much the Taliban had evolved from the ruthless regime that ruled Afghanistan in the 1990s.</p> <p>For the next nine years, the Taliban continued to lull the world with conciliatory messaging as they pursued a bloody war at home in parallel with diplomatic efforts to secure their ultimate goal: an American military withdrawal.</p> <p>“Monopoly of power is a story of failure. That is why we want to have all on board,” Suhail Shaheen, now the Taliban’s ambassador-designate to the United Nations, said in an interview with The Wall Street Journal six weeks before the group seized Kabul, deposed the Afghan republic and monopolized all power. “Past experiences have shown that you will ultimately fail and will not bring durable peace.”</p> <p>Throughout its history, Afghanistan defied foreign attempts to reshape the country, from the British Empire in the 19th century to the Soviet occupation in the 1980s to the failed American experiment in nation-building.</p> <p>An examination of why U.S. peace efforts collapsed so spectacularly, setting back the Biden presidency and America’s global standing, reveals the Taliban’s mastery of the diplomatic long game.</p>



America's increasing impatience with its longest overseas war drove the pace of these talks—removing one by one the Taliban's incentives to compromise. For President Biden just as for President Trump, the “priority was to get out, not the Afghan settlement,” said [Zalmay Khalilzad](#), who served as chief U.S. negotiator under both administrations. “They made it clear—and that strengthened the Talibs.”

Seeking an exit, U.S. officials found it expedient to paint Taliban behavior in the best possible light while exaggerating the strength of the Afghan republic they had brought to life. Recognizing this opening, the Taliban leadership learned how to obfuscate their true intentions in the comforting language that appealed to foreign diplomats and negotiators.

The question now is whether Western powers can apply lessons from past failures as they try to nudge the Islamist movement into adopting more-moderate policies. Experience suggests that the Taliban won't readily trade long-held traditions for Western cash and a place in the global community.

Some U.S. and former Afghan officials continue to believe the relatively pragmatic Taliban they dealt with were sincere and that a negotiated solution could have preserved at least some achievements gleaned from the 20-year international effort in Afghanistan. Intransigence by President Ashraf Ghani, they argue, ultimately torpedoed these efforts and bolstered the Taliban's more hard-line elements.

Unable to fight once American support disappeared, [Afghanistan's armed forces disintegrated in August](#), allowing the Taliban to [seize almost all of the country's provincial capitals and reach the outskirts of Kabul](#) in just over a week. The collapse of remaining government structures after Mr. Ghani fled the country on Aug. 15 rendered U.S.-backed talks on a peaceful transition moot.

The new Afghan government established in September is made up almost exclusively of Taliban clerics prominent in the insurgency. While the new regime has refrained so far from openly hosting terrorist groups or committing the kind of atrocities that earned it world-wide condemnation in the past, it has already sharply curtailed the rights of women, banned girls' education beyond the sixth grade in most provinces and marginalized ethnic communities that aren't part of its Pashtun power base.

In continuing talks with U.S. and allies in Doha, Qatar, the new Taliban administration is seeking diplomatic recognition, a removal of American sanctions and the unfreezing of over \$9 billion in Afghan central-bank assets abroad. One of Washington's key conditions is the creation of a more inclusive government in Kabul that respects human rights, one that would fulfill promises that the Taliban have been making since Chantilly.

“The Taliban regime should seek legitimacy within Afghanistan before seeking international recognition,” said Thomas West, the U.S. special representative for Afghanistan, who is leading these talks.

### **The Road to Doha**

The Taliban sought to negotiate with Washington and other Afghans immediately after a U.S. invasion ousted their government in 2001. Hamid Karzai, Afghanistan's American-anointed new leader, wanted the Islamist movement to participate in the Bonn conference that year that established the country's new political order. Washington, still shaken in the immediate aftermath of the Sept. 11 attacks, which Osama bin Laden plotted on Afghan soil, vetoed the plan. Potential Taliban negotiators were hunted down by U.S. special-operations forces and the Central Intelligence Agency, and shipped to detention in Guantánamo Bay, Cuba.

American and allied attitudes to engaging the Taliban changed as the group bounced back in the ensuing decade. By 2009, the Taliban once again controlled large parts of the countryside. Mr. Obama surged the U.S. military presence to over 100,000 troops to defend the Afghan republic—while also promising to start withdrawing all American forces 18 months later.

By the time Washington was ready to negotiate, Taliban leaders refused to sit down with Mr. Karzai's administration, dismissing it as an American puppet with no legitimacy or agency of its own. Mr. Karzai, for his part, objected to the U.S. engaging in talks with the Taliban that excluded the Afghan republic's

democratically elected government. The Obama administration agreed not to discuss Afghanistan's future without Kabul but also endorsed the idea of creating a Taliban political mission abroad to facilitate diplomatic contacts.

The U.S. and the insurgents began building trust by negotiating tactical deals, such as freeing five senior Taliban leaders who had spent more than a decade in Guantánamo in exchange for the Taliban handing over Bowe Bergdahl, a U.S. Army sergeant who walked off his base and was captured by the insurgents. Taliban representatives, some of whom had been living in Doha for years, [formally opened a political office there in 2013](#).

While the Taliban still rejected direct talks with the Kabul government, its envoys based in Doha began to engage in several rounds of so-called track-two meetings with members of the Afghan republic's political elites. The Chantilly confab was followed by similar events in Europe, Russia and China.

Over the years, the Taliban office in Doha, and the exemption of its members from United Nations travel sanctions, allowed the insurgent movement to reach out to governments world-wide, gaining growing acceptance as a legitimate political force.

"One of the reasons why the Taliban outsmarted Americans is the fact they set up relations with the whole world while negotiating with the Americans—something that the Americans didn't want to happen," said Rahimullah Mahmood, a veteran insurgent commander who served as governor of Wardak province after the Taliban takeover and now is deputy head of the Kandahar-based military corps. "They succeeded in convincing the world that the Taliban weren't the terrorists as depicted by American propaganda."

In 2018, President Trump, a longtime critic of the Afghan war, scrapped the long-held precondition that the U.S. would only enter into talks with the Taliban that included the Afghan republic's government. Mr. Khalilzad, a former U.S. ambassador to Kabul and to the United Nations, was appointed as special envoy with wide latitude to negotiate a deal.

Born in Afghanistan in 1951, Mr. Khalilzad knew Mr. Ghani since both went to the U.S. as high-school exchange students. The two men later studied at the American University in Beirut and then earned their Ph.D.s in the U.S.—Mr. Khalilzad at the University of Chicago, and Mr. Ghani at Columbia. Mr. Khalilzad's dealings with the Taliban dated back to the 1990s, when he served as a consultant for the Unocal oil company that explored building a pipeline through Afghanistan.

"His mandate was to figure out a way to enable us to leave quickly and potentially zero out the force, but to be able to call it a victory," said a senior State Department official who was involved in the effort. "And it wasn't always understood that those were mostly mutually exclusive."

Mr. Ghani, a former American citizen who succeeded Mr. Karzai as president in 2014, was alarmed by these negotiations. A co-author of a book called "Fixing Failed States" and a onetime fixture of Washington's think-tank circuit, he boasted to other Afghan officials about his understanding of American politics. But, until too late, he and senior officials in his administration misread American intentions and clung on to illusions that Washington would never actually pull the plug on Kabul.

The U.S. had been talking about leaving Afghanistan for more than a decade, after all. "There was this notion of Afghanistan being a unique geographical location that would always be an area of interest for global powers," said Nader Nadery, a senior Afghan peace negotiator who headed the fallen republic's civil service. "Some of our colleagues believed until the last months that the U.S. forces would never leave."

"In Kabul, they were living in an unrealistic world," agreed Mr. Khalilzad, who left the U.S. government in October. "That was the grand miscalculation."

That belief that America's national-security establishment wouldn't allow Mr. Trump or Mr. Biden to abandon Afghanistan was coupled with another strategic blunder: excessive optimism about the Afghan

republic's own military strength, Mr. Khalilzad added. "They didn't assess their forces correctly. I don't know that any of them thought, at the leadership level, that the force would collapse that quickly."

The combination of these two miscalculations meant that Mr. Ghani slow-rolled peace talks between the Afghan republic and the Taliban on a possible power-sharing agreement that would have inevitably involved him leaving office. It is unclear to what extent the Taliban would have compromised. But, as the insurgents made dramatic military gains, their calculations changed, too. In Doha over the months, discussions moved from possible power-sharing to considering an "inclusive government" dominated by the Taliban to essentially a surrender on Taliban terms.

"Ghani was not flexible, and that is why we are in this dark situation," said Habiba Sarabi, a member of the Afghan republic's negotiating team with the Taliban and a former governor of Bamian province. "His mentality was that the Taliban should join his government and he would be on the top. This was not possible in a peace process. He loved power. He was crazy for power."

Ms. Sarabi, who like most of the Afghan republic's senior officials and negotiators is now in exile, added that Mr. Khalilzad shared the blame because he consistently stressed the Taliban's alleged moderation and interest in a peaceful transition. "He wanted to sugarcoat the almond. But at the end the bitter taste appeared," she said.

Mr. Khalilzad, who wrote an op-ed all the way back in 1996 to argue that "the Taliban does not practice the anti-U.S. style of fundamentalism," said that he believed in the sincerity of Taliban negotiators and that it was the fault of both sides that no political settlement could be found. "They didn't rise to the occasion," he said. "I couldn't blame that one side was more at fault than the other."

### **Withdrawal or Peace?**

To begin serious talks, Mr. Khalilzad needed a Taliban counterpart with appropriate seniority. Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar fit the bill. He was a co-founder of the Islamist organization, served as deputy minister of defense in the previous Taliban regime and coordinated the insurgency's commanders after the U.S. invasion. A relative pragmatist, Mr. Baradar had tried to open negotiations with the U.S. in 2001, and engaged in secret contacts with Mr. Karzai's government in 2010. One of the few senior Taliban members from the same aristocratic Popolzai clan as Mr. Karzai, Mr. Baradar was captured by Pakistani and U.S. agents in Karachi later that year, and kept in Pakistani custody since.

In September 2018, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo led a delegation to Islamabad to press the need for Pakistan's cooperation and to demand Mr. Baradar's release. Pakistan acquiesced and Mr. Baradar moved to Doha weeks later to take the helm of the Taliban political office. The Taliban's secretive supreme leader Hibatullah Akhundzada, who has never been filmed in public, gave his blessing to the negotiations.

The talks faced a constraint from the start: Mr. Trump's impatience to bring home the troops. American negotiators say they woke up every morning with the fear of seeing what they described as "the tweet of Damocles" in which Mr. Trump would announce an unconditional withdrawal.

As American and Taliban envoys started hashing out a deal in Doha, U.S. ambassador to Kabul John Bass tried for months to push Mr. Ghani to name a broad negotiating team that would be ready to begin Kabul's own talks with the Taliban. The Afghan president refused, unwilling to dilute his administration's control over the process.

"President Ghani's model of negotiation—and that was the essence of his unhappiness—was that he should be the one negotiating with Hibatullah. That he would have his laptop under his arm, sit with Hibatullah, and make a deal," Mr. Khalilzad said. "And of course that was not realistic from the get-go."

By the summer of 2019, Mr. Khalilzad's team hammered out the broad contours of the deal with Mr. Baradar in Qatar. Then, the Taliban suddenly reversed course and demanded prisoner releases, a new, major concession. To break the deadlock, the U.S. yielded and signed off on a clause that required Kabul

to free up to 5,000 Taliban prisoners in Afghan custody. Mr. Ghani was allowed to read the draft text but not to keep a copy. He wasn't given access to the agreement's secret annexes, either.

With preparations under way for Mr. Trump to host a grand signing ceremony around the Sept. 11 anniversary, a car bomb went off near the U.S. Embassy and Afghan security compounds in Kabul, killing 12 people, including a U.S. soldier. The Taliban claimed responsibility. [A furious Mr. Trump tweeted that he "called off" the talks](#) with the Islamist movement and canceled plans for a meeting with Taliban leaders and Mr. Ghani in Camp David.

Encouraged by the apparent about-turn, Mr. Ghani hoped that Mr. Trump's rush for the exits would now be restrained. [His national-security adviser, Hamdullah Mohib, complained that America was "whitewashing the Taliban"](#) because it was tired of the war, and called for reassessing the deal. Mr. Nadery, the peace negotiator, wasn't as optimistic. That September, he binge-watched a Netflix series on the fall of South Vietnam, noting that the government in Saigon, just as the government in Kabul, had been kept in the dark by the U.S.

In Washington, John Bolton, Mr. Trump's then-national security adviser, held a similar view. "We were basically selling the government out. The analogy of Vietnam is really true," said Mr. Bolton, who quit that month over disagreements with Mr. Trump that included Afghanistan policy. "In both cases, everybody, every other interested party could see that the principal U.S. objective was to get out."

The suspension didn't last long. Mr. Trump still wanted to leave Afghanistan before the U.S. presidential elections. Within weeks, U.S. diplomats opened talks to swap two professors of the American University in Kabul held hostage by the Taliban in return for Anas Haqqani, the younger brother of the Taliban's deputy leader Sirajuddin, who was held by the Afghan government. The U.S. has designated the Haqqani network a terrorist organization since 2012 because of its links to al Qaeda.

By February 2020, the Taliban agreed to a brief cease-fire as a show of goodwill and Mr. Trump approved signing the deal. It was officially called the "Agreement for Bringing Peace to Afghanistan," even though the Taliban made no commitment to stop military operations against the Afghan government and security forces.

In the text, the U.S. promised a full military withdrawal by May 2021 in exchange for the Taliban pledging to prevent terrorist groups from using Afghan soil to threaten other nations. The Taliban, in a significant departure, also agreed to open peace talks with Mr. Ghani's government. The U.S. withdrawal wasn't conditional on the success of these negotiations—in part because Washington didn't want to give Mr. Ghani a lever to slow down the departure.

[Mr. Pompeo flew to Doha to attend the signing ceremony](#) on Feb. 29, 2020. Minutes before his arrival in Qatar, the Taliban staged a victory march with the white flags of their Islamic Emirate, prompting fears among the Qatari hosts that the embarrassment might scuttle the deal at the last moment. The Qataris were prepared to prevent the Taliban from entering the luxury Sheraton resort with the flags. The insurgency's representatives left them in their vehicles.

Mr. Pompeo grimly shook hands with Mr. Baradar after aides failed to orchestrate his separation from the Taliban in the room. Mr. Khalilzad signed for the U.S. while Mr. Pompeo followed with a somber speech delivered mostly to journalists in another room afterward. Members of Mr. Khalilzad's team were relieved the day had passed without incident and stayed out until late in Doha, drinking overpriced cocktails.

Mr. Ghani initially resisted the Doha agreement's commitment, made by the U.S. without his assent, that Kabul release thousands of Taliban prisoners. He also kept rebuffing American pressure to create a negotiating team including his political foes in Kabul, such as Mr. Karzai and his challenger in the 2019 presidential elections, Abdullah Abdullah. Any power-sharing deal with the insurgents would be contingent on Mr. Ghani stepping down, after all. Loath to leave office, the Afghan president instead kept hoping that Washington would reverse the withdrawal decision, especially if Mr. Trump were to fail in his re-election bid.

“We, the Afghan government, should have seen the writing on the wall,” Mr. Mohib, who served as Mr. Ghani’s national-security adviser until both men fled Kabul on Aug. 15, said when asked what was the Afghan administration’s biggest error. “It was a withdrawal, not a peace agreement. Democratic values were not as much of a priority as we thought. The gains of the past 20 years were not as much of a priority as we thought they would be.”

Taliban military commanders were also initially upset with the Doha deal. Mullah Mohammad Fazel, a Taliban negotiator and one of the five former Guantánamo inmates freed in exchange for Sgt. Bergdahl, traveled across front lines from Qatar to a meeting with insurgent commanders from all over Afghanistan to explain its terms.

Some of the men, sporting the Taliban’s black turbans and beards, believed the agreement was naive, according to those present. How were they supposed to trust that the U.S. would in fact leave Afghanistan the following year? Why should they stop hitting American forces even as Washington retained the right to conduct airstrikes against them?

“During the negotiations, many were claiming that the Americans were deceiving us, that it was all a trap for us,” said Mr. Mahmood, then the military commander of the Taliban’s eastern zone, who attended the gathering in the Musa Qala district of Helmand province. “Many military commanders wanted to resume attacks on Americans. The suicide bombers, in particular, were extremely sad: they cried and mourned the fact that they wouldn’t get martyred.”

Yet, the Taliban political negotiators’ argument that Washington would deliver on pledges made in Doha and withdraw from Afghanistan prevailed at the end, said Mr. Mahmood. “It’s a treaty of victory,” was the message that he carried back to his troops.

Shortly after that, the Taliban’s propaganda department published a calendar for the Islamic year 1442 that began in August 2020. It showed an American and a Taliban hand signing the Doha deal—described as “the agreement to end the invasion”—and Afghanistan breaking free from chains of foreign occupation. Below was a quote from the Taliban’s supreme leader, Mr. Hibatullah, pledging: “We don’t want the monopoly on power.”

### **Drawdown**

The lack of progress in Afghanistan ahead of the U.S. presidential election was causing Mr. Trump to get impatient, and in June he ordered a fresh drawdown of troops to 4,500, without any concessions by the Taliban.

At that point, the Taliban hadn’t delivered on any of their major promises except for stopping attacks on American troops. They still refused to meet the Afghan government’s delegation. Trying to gain the prisoner release and break the stalemate, Mr. Baradar made verbal assurances to U.S. negotiators that violence would drop as soon as the 5,000 Taliban inmates were set free.

A buoyed Mr. Khalilzad sent a cable to Washington announcing that Mr. Baradar had promised a near-complete cease-fire. Ross Wilson, who had taken over the role of top U.S. diplomat in Kabul, delivered the message to Mr. Ghani. The promised cease-fire “was part of our selling of what was a very difficult decision for good reasons,” Mr. Wilson said. Grudgingly, Mr. Ghani agreed to a prisoner release in phases in exchange for the Taliban setting free 1,000 government personnel in their custody.

With the release complete in September 2020, Taliban and Afghan republic negotiators finally gathered in Doha’s Sharq Village resort for their own peace talks. The venue spread around a large beachside pool frequented by bikini-clad tourists who lounged under loud pop music that wafted into Taliban negotiators’ rooms. Afghan republic delegates were told by Kabul to stay away from the pool to avoid embarrassing headlines. The Taliban didn’t swim.

The two sides had breakfast in separate halls and rarely socialized. Key Taliban negotiators, who by then spent several years in Qatar and had families and businesses there, only occasionally showed up in the Sharq Village.

As the two Afghan delegations began their discussions, a U.S. military team monitored the levels of violence in Afghanistan to evaluate whether the Taliban were abiding by Mr. Baradar's assurances. The team documented a rise in insurgent attacks instead. U.S. Army Col. Brad Moses, who served as deputy to the U.S. military commander in Afghanistan, Gen. Scott Miller, briefed about the alarming data on intensifying violence during regular calls with the White House, the State Department, the CIA and other U.S. government agencies.

"It never reduced," he said. The Taliban would claim to the U.S. that these attacks were either carried out by spoilers or criminals when confronted with the evidence, he added.

The Afghan government, meanwhile, instructed its forces, cooped up in isolated bases and outposts, to stop offensive operations during the talks and engage in what it called "active defense." The loss of initiative handed over a critical advantage to the insurgents, said Lt. Gen. Imam Nazar Behboud, who commanded the Afghan army's Kandahar corps.

"This meant that you just had to stand there and wait until the Taliban attacked you. No matter how much you got killed, you just had to wait," he said. "There were huge casualties. The troops were tired, they were not receiving any backup from Kabul, and they lost their trust in the central government."

By October, the Taliban had gathered a huge force in the south and launched a wide-scale assault on Helmand's provincial capital of Lashkar Gah. The U.S. intervened with airstrikes to prevent the city's collapse. Weeks later, the Taliban moved toward Kandahar, capturing the Arghandab district on the edge of the country's second-largest city. Another torrent of U.S. airstrikes stopped further advances. Both sides accused each other of violating the Doha agreement.

Still, the Taliban stuck to their promise not to strike American targets, showing that they could exercise discipline over their fighters when they wanted to. Despite sustaining heavy casualties in the airstrikes, the Taliban leaders calculated it wasn't in their interest to disrupt an American withdrawal they viewed as inevitable.

"We convinced our fighters that, as our negotiations with the Americans are under way, we will not fire a single bullet at the Americans. We proved that we can uphold our treaties," said Mohammad Farouk Ansari, a member of the Taliban's military commission that united some 50 top commanders from across the country. "We told each other at the time that it was a victory. When the Americans started closing their outposts and evacuating their bases, we knew that the country was ours, today or tomorrow."

U.S. officials still wonder whether they had been played by Mr. Baradar's promises or whether the chief Taliban negotiator himself was being used by the insurgency's real leadership to lull the U.S. and Kabul into complacency.

"It was always hard to tell if the Taliban were serious about a political settlement or not," said Carter Malkasian, who was part of Mr. Khalilzad's team as a representative from the Joint Chiefs of Staff. "One possibility is that they never meant it. That they were saying what we needed to hear. We may learn, like we have about the Vietnamese negotiations, that they never had any intention of conceding."

The U.S. presidential election was held on Nov. 3 and Mr. Trump lost. While fighting to overturn the results, he ordered the Pentagon to pull remaining troops out of Afghanistan and appointed a new defense secretary, Chris Miller, a former Green Beret and vocal war skeptic, to carry out the plan. Mr. Miller, along with other close advisers, convinced the president to keep a downsized force of 2,500 troops in Afghanistan to avoid the country's collapse, which they said would hurt Mr. Trump if he wanted to run for office again.



Around that time, Mr. Khalilzad circulated proposals for a new interim government that would be equally split between the Taliban and representatives of the republic. The proposal, he said, didn't specify who would be in charge.

Mr. Miller said the unspoken goal of retaining a small force to keep the Kabul government afloat was to eventually force Mr. Ghani to cut a power-sharing deal. "And let's be honest, the Taliban probably would have had about 14 seats in the cabinet. And Ghani probably would have had four. He probably would have had sports and recreation. Probably would have had, like, roads and sewers," Mr. Miller added.

The Afghan president hoped the American determination to withdraw from Afghanistan would end with Mr. Trump's term on Jan. 20. He was so convinced that the new Biden administration wouldn't follow through on the Doha agreement that he declined to see Mr. Khalilzad when the American envoy came to Afghanistan that January. Mr. Ghani subsequently rejected Mr. Khalilzad's power-sharing plan, which was promptly leaked to the media, and kept refusing to engage in meaningful talks in Doha.

"It was us, the republic, that were lingering. The Taliban were much more flexible," said Fatima Gailani, a negotiator for the republic who belongs to one of the country's most influential families. "Negotiations need a give and take, and an honorable compromise is absolutely fine, but that was not the case at all. It was purposefully lingering and waiting for Biden to come. Why were they thinking that Biden would bring a miracle, I don't know."

Mr. Khalilzad gave his proposal to Mr. Baradar, who agreed to consider it but offered no formal response.

By then, Taliban commanders on the ground, emboldened by their military successes and the looming American withdrawal, had little desire to share power with their enemies. "The strategy of a colonizer, when it is forced out of a country, is to leave its offspring behind, so as not to break the chain of colonization. The Americans wanted to keep a parallel government here, for the Taliban and the rest to have equal power," said Mr. Ansari, the Taliban military commission member who operated southeast of Kabul. "We did not agree with this from the very beginning. We said that we're the rulers in the country. The country is our home. We don't accept a second ruler in our home."

Mr. Ghani's hopes about Mr. Biden were quickly dashed. The new president had advocated withdrawing from Afghanistan back when he served as Mr. Obama's vice president, and showed little inclination to reverse Mr. Trump's deal.

For months after Mr. Biden took office, interagency officials held an endless series of meetings on how to mitigate risks from the pullout. Abandoning the Doha agreement, the White House calculated, would force the Taliban to resume attacks on American forces, requiring a major troop increase with no end in sight. As for the peace talks shepherded by Mr. Khalilzad in Doha, the White House concluded that chances of progress were too slim to justify delaying the withdrawal.

"There is not a lot of evidence that either side treated those negotiations in Doha in good faith," said a current senior Biden administration official who was involved in the decision-making.

On April 12, the Taliban refused to participate in a peace conference that the U.S. was trying to convene under the sponsorship of the United Nations in Turkey, fearing that they would be forced to make concessions.

Two days later, Mr. Biden announced that all U.S. forces would be out of Afghanistan by Sept. 11, regardless of whether the Taliban and the Afghan reach a political deal or any other developments on the ground, a move that removed the conditionality attached to the 2020 Doha agreement.

"We will not conduct a hasty rush to the exit. We'll do it...responsibly, deliberately and safely," Mr. Biden said in the White House's Treaty Room that day. "More and endless American military force could not create or sustain a durable Afghan government."

Kabul was stunned. The following afternoon, Mr. Ghani convened top Afghan security officials to discuss Mr. Biden's bombshell. The army chief of staff wondered how the Afghan military could continue servicing its aircraft once American advisers and contractors left. Mr. Ghani, according to a person present at the meeting, was calm and said he was working on securing continuing U.S. support.

Vice President Amrullah Saleh, who used to work closely with the CIA, refused to believe that Mr. Biden would actually withdraw all U.S. forces. Could Mr. Biden's announcement simply be a pressure tactic to force Kabul make concessions to the Taliban in Doha, he wondered, according to people present.

Mr. Saleh, Afghanistan's former intelligence chief, told the Journal his U.S. interlocutors had been assuring until the last moment that Washington wouldn't abandon his administration. "There were so many occasions in which I asked the visiting dignitaries, diplomats, intelligence officials, generals and members of the U.S. intelligentsia if the U.S. would hand over Afghanistan to the Taliban," Mr. Saleh said after Kabul's fall to the Taliban. "The answer would be outright no, with nuances explained later but still implying no."

As members of Mr. Ghani's inner circle continued to cling to illusions, Afghan army and police field commanders drew a different conclusion: The end was nigh. Survival meant striking private deals with the Taliban and preparing for a rainy day meant selling off their units' ammunition, food and fuel on the black market.

By May, the Taliban started taking one district after another, often without a fight, allowing government troops to go home unharmed and giving them pocket money for the road. Still, in accordance with verbal commitments given to Mr. Khalilzad, the insurgents refrained from seizing any of the country's 34 provincial capitals. In Doha, Taliban negotiator Mohammad Nabi Omari, another former Guantánamo inmate who is affiliated with the Haqqani network, hashed out a transition proposal with a narrow circle of Afghan republic representatives.

Under the proposed deal, the Taliban's supreme leader, Mr. Hibatullah, would become Afghanistan's head of state but the country would turn into a constitutional monarchy of sorts, governed under the 1964 constitution promulgated by King Zahir Shah, with an elected parliament. Ms. Gailani, who was involved in this negotiation, joked that Mr. Hibatullah, who hadn't been seen in public for years and widely presumed to be dead, was a perfect head of state. Her Taliban interlocutor assured her that Mr. Hibatullah was very much alive. Both sides agreed to keep the planned agreement secret.

"They were not easy. There were things on which they would absolutely not compromise upon. They would never accept the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan. They would never accept our constitution," said Ms. Gailani. "But at least 60% of our values could be rescued. Our flag could be rescued."

Mohammad Masoom Stanekzai, the lead Afghan government negotiator in Doha and a former defense minister and intelligence chief who regularly briefed Mr. Ghani on the talks, said he believed the plan presented by Mr. Omari was just an individual idea and not a solid proposal backed by the entire Taliban leadership.

In late June, Mr. Ghani flew to Washington in a last-ditch effort to persuade the U.S. of the need to keep providing support. Mr. Biden agreed to receive Mr. Ghani in the White House only if he came with Dr. Abdullah, then holding the title of head of Afghanistan's High Council for National Reconciliation. "We're going to stick with you. And we're going to do our best to see to it you have the tools you need," Mr. Biden promised in joint remarks.

The American president's April withdrawal decision "has made everybody recalculate and reconsider," Mr. Ghani chimed in. "The Afghan nation is in an 1861 moment, like President Lincoln, rallying to the defense of the republic. It's a choice of values—the values of an exclusionary system or an inclusionary system."

Ms. Gailani met Mr. Ghani in Washington during that trip and briefed him on proposals discussed with Mr. Omari and other Taliban negotiators. Mr. Ghani encouraged her to continue the talks, she said. “I thought, good, he decided to be the de Klerk of Afghanistan, not the Saddam or Gadhafi,” she recalled. “It was clear that this was the end, but at least it could have been a decent end. At least the institutions, the army, the police would not have collapsed.”

Yet, in following weeks, Mr. Ghani continued playing for time. “He lingered and lingered, which just made things more difficult,” Ms. Gailani said.

In July, a senior foreign envoy visited Mr. Ghani in Kabul. The Afghan president was defiant, boasting about the strength of government forces massed in the city and saying that the Taliban would suffer 50,000 casualties should they attempt to attack the capital. Still, he added that he instructed his bodyguards to give him a lethal injection should he face the risk of being captured by the Taliban, according to the envoy.

Gen. Kenneth McKenzie, the head of U.S. Central Command, flew to Kabul later that month to meet Mr. Ghani, publicly promising intensified airstrikes in support of Afghan forces. “Taliban victory is not inevitable,” he said at the time. In private, Gen. McKenzie told Mr. Ghani that Mr. Biden was still evaluating options for continuing to provide air support to Afghan forces from bases in the Persian Gulf after the withdrawal.

### **The Republic Collapses**

In early August, the Taliban’s military commission chief, Mullah Abdul Qayyum Zakir, gathered military commanders in the insurgent stronghold of Aryub Zazi in the eastern Paktia province. The time to capture provincial capitals had come, Mr. Zakir announced, but the Taliban should take their time and not rush.

“It was decided that we should enter the cities cautiously, targeting the provinces that fall an easy prey,” said Hajji Qari Osman Ibrahimi, a member of the Taliban military commission who attended the meeting. “And we were told not to enter Kabul, because we had promised so to the Americans.”

As it turned out, almost all the cities were easy prey, and just a week later the Taliban were at the doorstep of the Afghan capital. Dr. Abdullah held another round of meetings in Doha and returned to Kabul to brief Mr. Ghani and other political leaders: A transitional arrangement that would save at least some of the Afghan republic’s institutions was still possible. The Taliban had a strong incentive to cooperate. The U.S. had assured the insurgents that such a transitional government would get diplomatic recognition and would have access to billions of dollars in Afghan central-bank reserves and continued foreign aid.

Dr. Abdullah, Mr. Karzai, Islamist warlord Gulbuddin Hekmatyar and other Afghan leaders planned to fly to Doha to strike such an agreement but needed Mr. Ghani’s commitment to resign first. Once again, the Afghan president stalled for time, haggling over the composition of the delegation and insisting that close aides such as Mr. Mohib participate. The delegation was tentatively scheduled to leave Aug. 16.

Amin Karim, a senior member of Mr. Hekmatyar’s party and a former adviser to Mr. Ghani, went to see the Afghan president in the palace that week.

“It’s game over,” he started the meeting, in English. Mr. Ghani, flustered, accused Mr. Karim of defeatism, saying that Kabul was safe and that tens of thousands of elite troops from all over the country were ready to protect the Afghan capital.

On Aug. 14, Mr. Wilson, the American envoy, also met with Mr. Ghani. By then, the major cities of Kandahar, Herat and Ghazni had fallen to the Taliban. He says he was struck by how calm the Afghan leader appeared. Reporters were invited to cover the meeting, which was unusual. Taliban commanders in the mountains around the city had no inkling that just hours later they would be in control of the Afghan capital.

“We were sure that provinces would fall without any resistance, but we weren’t sure about Kabul. Bluffing by the government had given us a sense that there would be a fight,” said Mohammad Salim Saad, a senior

commander of the Haqqani network's Badri force who oversaw insurgent operations within the capital. "We worried that a battle for Kabul would destroy the city."

The morning of Aug. 15, some armed Taliban sympathizers started appearing in the city. On Washington's request, the Taliban issued a statement in Doha that requested all Taliban units to stay away. Mr. Wilson ordered all remaining personnel to move from the U.S. Embassy compound in Kabul's Green Zone to the airport, then held by the American military.

Remaining staff were told to leave their personal effects behind and were allowed just one suitcase. Mr. Wilson left his suits and shoes at the embassy, and packed the essentials, including a book that had just arrived via Amazon delivery. As he boarded the chopper to leave for the airport, the pilots told him that Mr. Ghani had been spotted fleeing Afghanistan by helicopter about 30 minutes earlier.

"He gave us no hint that he was leaving. Not a scintilla of a hint that he was going to leave the country," Mr. Wilson recalled. Mr. Ghani, in a statement released weeks later from the United Arab Emirates, where he now resides, said his unexpected departure "was the only way to keep the guns silent and save Kabul."

In Doha, senior Taliban representatives gathered on the 21st floor of Qatar's foreign ministry for a meeting with the country's special envoy who oversaw Afghan affairs, Mutlaq al Qahtani. In disbelief, they watched the news of Mr. Ghani's escape. Would the U.S. military want to secure Kabul for two weeks, to enable an orderly transition, they asked.

Mr. Baradar, Mr. Khalilzad, Gen. McKenzie and other officials met in Doha that afternoon. "There was a sense of anarchy coming. Law and order was falling apart in Kabul," Mr. Khalilzad recalled. Following Mr. Ghani's escape, the rest of the Afghan republic's ministers, including the minister of defense, also rushed to the airport to flee the country.

The Biden administration wasn't interested in taking potentially open-ended responsibility for the besieged Afghan capital and its five million residents. "It's not my job. My job is to safely withdraw my forces," Gen. McKenzie replied to the Taliban proposal, according to Mr. Khalilzad. "If you attack, we'll defend ourselves."

By 8 p.m., Taliban units, mostly those belonging to the Haqqani network, started entering the city, reinforcing the first echelon of clandestine operatives who had seized strategic locations.

Instead of a negotiated transfer of power with international recognition that had been discussed with the U.S., the Taliban found themselves running a government with empty coffers, subjected to American sanctions and denied a United Nations seat.

Mr. Baradar, widely expected to become the Taliban's new head of government, was marginalized as one of three deputy prime ministers, and later disappeared from view for weeks. His verbal promises to American and other international negotiators, such as a commitment to ensure girls' education, were no longer binding for Afghanistan's new regime.

Instead, the Haqqanis and the southern military commanders under Mullah Omar's son Mullah Mohammad Yaqoob emerged as the factions with real authority in Kabul.

A newly published Taliban calendar, for the Islamic year that began in August 2021, no longer carried Mr. Hibatullah's promise of not seeking a monopoly on power. Instead, it pledged to enforce a "pure Islamic system." A pile of wrecked Humvees left behind and a fleet of Chinooks flying away with tattered American flags illustrated the message.

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HEADLINE	12/25 Central Africa: joint forces battle jihadists
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/dec/25/central-africa-fighting-kills-six-soldiers-and-22-jihadists-in-lake-chad-region">https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/dec/25/central-africa-fighting-kills-six-soldiers-and-22-jihadists-in-lake-chad-region</a>

GIST	<p>Six soldiers and at least 22 jihadists have died in fighting in the Lake Chad region of central Africa, a joint force deployed to the area said on Friday.</p> <p>The force described the operation, conducted by troops from Niger and Nigeria backed by fighter planes, as a “success” and said it had benefited from “decisive support by American partners”.</p> <p>The region around Lake Chad, a vast lake bordered by Nigeria, Niger, Cameroon and Chad, has become a bolthole for Boko Haram and Islamic State-linked jihadists.</p> <p>In a statement, the multinational joint task force (MNJTF), bringing together troops from those four countries, said it had conducted a three-week sweep on Nigeria’s side of the border.</p> <p>Four Nigerian and two Nigerien troops were killed in the operation that ended on Tuesday, while 23 of their comrades were lightly wounded, it said.</p> <p>“At least 22 terrorists were neutralised,” the statement said, using a term referring to jihadists.</p> <p>The force destroyed four vehicles, torched motorcycles and recovered AK47 assault rifles, it added.</p> <p>The troops also discovered and destroyed “artillery emplacements” pointing towards the south-eastern Niger city of Diffa.</p> <p>Located close to the Nigerian border, Diffa hosted national independence celebrations on 18 December that were attended by president Mohamed Bazoum.</p> <p>The first phase of the operation unfolded in the Malam Fatori area, and the second in the areas of Arege, Gashiger, Asaga and Kamagunma, the taskforce said.</p> <p>The MNJTF traces its origins back to 1994, when it was a Nigeria-only force aimed at combatting banditry on the country’s northern border.</p> <p>It was later expanded after Boko Haram launched a bloody insurgency in north-eastern Nigeria that then extended into neighbouring countries.</p> <p>Niger, the poorest country in the world according to the yardstick of the UN’s human development index, is also battling jihadist attacks on its western border with Mali.</p>
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## Suspicious, Unusual

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HEADLINE	12/27 China talks up ‘green’ Olympics
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.reuters.com/world/china/olympics-china-talks-up-green-olympics-prepares-fight-smog-2021-12-27/">https://www.reuters.com/world/china/olympics-china-talks-up-green-olympics-prepares-fight-smog-2021-12-27/</a>
GIST	<p>ZHANGJIAKOU, China, Dec 27 (Reuters) - China is using the Winter Olympic Games to drive its efforts to improve the environment, but smog-prone capital Beijing is still preparing for the worst as the opening ceremony looms.</p> <p>Beijing has improved its air quality since China won its bid to host the Games, but the Ministry of Ecology and Environment has said winter smog risks remained "severe".</p> <p>Ministry spokesman Liu Youbin told reporters on Thursday that contingency plans were in place.</p> <p>"When the time comes, Beijing and Hebei will be guided to adopt reasonable environmental protection measures in accordance with the law," he said.</p>

Rumours that polluting heavy industries in the area would be shuttered from Jan. 1 were "not true", however, he said.

Critics warned in 2015 - when China won its bid - that the Winter Olympics could be overshadowed by hazardous smog in a region dominated by heavy industry. Chinese President Xi Jinping subsequently vowed to run a "green" Games, and Hebei promised to "transform and upgrade" its industrial economy.

Since then, China has planted thousands of hectares of trees in Beijing and surrounding Hebei province, built sprawling wind and solar farms, and relocated hundreds of enterprises.

In Zhangjiakou city, 200 km (125 miles) northwest of Beijing and host to skiing and snowboarding events, 26-year-old amateur skier Deng Zhongping said he has already felt the difference.

"When I came to Beijing a few years back I would suffer with rhinitis because of pollution, but the air quality in Beijing-Tianjin-Hebei has improved a lot," he said.

"I think the air quality at Zhangjiakou ski resort is even better than some foreign ski resorts."

In 2016, average concentrations of PM2.5 in the Beijing-Tianjin-Hebei region stood at 71 micrograms per cubic metre and soared to more than 500 micrograms over winter. That compares to an average 40 micrograms from January to September this year.

The reading in Beijing was 33 micrograms in the first three quarters, meeting China's 35-microgram standard, although exceeding the recommended World Health Organization level of 5 micrograms and likely to rise much higher over winter.

"China will win many medals at the Winter Olympics, but the smog ... could plunge the Games into difficulties," the Washington-based International Fund for China's Environment said earlier this year.

## GREENING THE GAMES

Officials said during a government-organised tour this week that all 26 Olympic venues in Beijing and Hebei province would be 100% powered by renewable energy. More than 700 hydrogen-fuelled vehicles will also be deployed, despite the government falling short of a hydrogen production target.

Preparations have included a tree-planting programme that increased forest coverage in Zhangjiakou to 70%-80%, up from 56% previously.

China has also said it would make the Games "carbon neutral" for the first time. Environmental group Greenpeace, though, said without more data it would be hard to evaluate whether the goal was actually met.

Water scarcity is another concern, especially when it comes to creating artificial snow and ice.

Organisers said the Games would not put additional pressure on local water supplies and rely instead on cisterns that collected mountain runoff and rainfall during the summer - in line with China's wider efforts to create a "circular" economy in which resources are fully utilised and recycled.

"We are all self-sufficient and ecologically circular," said Wang Jingxian, a member of the 2022 Games planning committee.

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HEADLINE	12/25 James Webb Space Telescope launches
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.wsj.com/articles/james-webb-telescopes-complicated-launch-has-astronomers-nervously-waiting-11640428205?mod=hp_lead_pos11">https://www.wsj.com/articles/james-webb-telescopes-complicated-launch-has-astronomers-nervously-waiting-11640428205?mod=hp_lead_pos11</a>



The [James Webb Space Telescope](#) launched successfully early Saturday, rising skyward aboard an Ariane 5 rocket that lifted off at 7:20 a.m. Eastern Standard Time from a pad in Kourou, French Guiana, and beginning a 29-day journey to its orbital perch some 1 million miles from Earth.

“Milestone achieved,” the National Aeronautics and Space Administration said in a tweet after the launch, adding that the telescope was “safely in space, powered on and communicating with ground controllers.”

For scientists world-wide, the sun-orbiting observatory—[the largest, most powerful instrument of its type](#) ever built—will herald a new era of discovery in space. One hundred times as powerful [as the Hubble Space Telescope](#), Webb will help astronomers peer at some of the oldest galaxies and stars in the universe, search for signs of habitability in the atmospheres of planets outside our solar system and study mysterious forces like dark energy using its infrared sensors.

“What an emotional day,” said Thomas Zurbuchen, associate administrator for NASA’s Science Mission Directorate. The launch marks “the beginning of one of the most amazing missions that humanity has ever conceived,” he said.

The launch was delayed twice in recent weeks, first because of technical issues and then because of poor weather.

To fit it into the rocket’s 18-foot-wide, 56-foot-high nose cone, mission scientists had to build the telescope’s gold-plated mirror—measuring 21.5 feet in diameter when fully deployed—as 18 separate segments that have to [fold together like petals of an origami flower](#).

Shortly after launch, the telescope successfully separated from the rocket and deployed its solar array so that it can begin generating electricity and charging its batteries, NASA said. Within the next 24 hours, plans call for mission scientists to command Webb to course-correct using on-board rockets so that it heads toward a point four times as distant as the moon called the second Lagrange point.

Then, complicated unfolding processes will begin, taking about two weeks to complete. Seventy hinges, 90 cables, 140 releases and 400 pulleys will be involved in unfolding the telescope’s tennis court-size sunshield by issuing commands to Webb from Earth. Webb will then open the two wings of its primary mirror and lock them in place.

“Now we have to realize there are still innumerable things that have to work, and they have to work perfectly,” NASA Administrator Bill Nelson said. “But we know that with great reward there is great risk.”

Webb has 344 “single-point failure” items. A single-point failure is a piece of equipment or part of the system that, should it fail, could scuttle the entire mission.

About 80% of those items are associated with the sunshield deployment. If a deployment mechanism malfunctions, or the sunshield snags as it unfolds, there is no way to repair it from Earth.

But if a malfunction were to occur, that doesn’t necessarily mean Webb would become a \$10 billion piece of space junk.

“There are enough redundancies built in that everything will be OK,” said Michael Maseda, an assistant professor of astronomy at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. “If one thing doesn’t work it won’t completely cancel the mission.”

A malfunction might affect Webb’s ability to see fainter stars or galaxies.

“Even with Webb at 90%, we’re still going to be seeing things we’ve never seen before,” he said.

It will take Webb 29 days to reach the second Lagrange point. There it will orbit the sun, 1 million miles from Earth, until at least 2026.

If all goes well, Webb can start conducting its first science experiments about six months after launch and is expected to produce its first photo this summer. It takes that long to completely unfold and align its mirrors, calibrate its cameras and infrared light spectrographs, and cool the telescope to its operating temperature. The telescope was jointly developed by NASA, the European Space Agency and the Canadian Space Agency.

Webb's mission is expected to last at least five years, though it will likely be 10, Dr. Maseda said. That timeline is constrained by the amount of fuel Webb has on board—fuel that is necessary to keep the telescope in its proper orbit and pointed in the direction that astronomers want it.

Webb is [designed to complement Hubble](#), which is orbiting Earth after being launched in 1990 on what was planned to be a 15-year mission. A series of technical issues shut it down twice this year.

"Hubble's really elderly," said Jonathan McDowell, an astronomer at the Harvard-Smithsonian Center for Astrophysics.

If the Webb mission fails and Hubble stops working, "it would mean there's a gap in our capabilities and we might be without a major space telescope for a while," he added.

Likely, the [next space telescope to launch](#) is the Nancy Grace Roman Space Telescope, which won't be ready until the mid-2020s.

"History of these big projects has been that success gives success," said Robert Smith, a historian of astronomy at the University of Alberta in Canada. "If Webb is a spectacular success, and there's no reason to think it won't be if everything works, then it makes future flagship missions more likely."

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HEADLINE	12/24 Long-term care tax could start Jan 1 <sup>st</sup> ?
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.seattlepi.com/local/seattlenews/article/wa-state-long-term-care-tax-may-start-jan-1-16726566.php">https://www.seattlepi.com/local/seattlenews/article/wa-state-long-term-care-tax-may-start-jan-1-16726566.php</a>
GIST	<p><a href="#">Washington</a> Gov. Jay Inslee on Thursday clarified what will be happening with the payroll tax meant to fund the state's new <a href="#">long-term care benefit</a>.</p> <p>The tax, 0.58% of a worker's total wages, is to be collected from workers by employers and then remitted to the state. Under the law, employers must collect that tax from their employees starting Jan. 1.</p> <p>Responding to issues raised about the new program, Democratic leaders in the state Senate <a href="#">asked Inslee to delay collecting the tax</a> from employees while lawmakers work to resolve those problems. But on Thursday, Inslee reiterated that he does not have authority to do so.</p> <p>"There is some inaccurate reporting and misinformation about the Legislature's long-term care bill, which under the law requires employers to withhold money from employee wages," <a href="#">he tweeted</a>. "Only the Legislature has the authority to eliminate that requirement."</p> <p>However, the Legislature does not convene for next year's legislative session until Jan. 10. Last week, Inslee asked the state Employment Security Department to refrain from collecting the tax from employers while the Legislature is in session, which many understood to mean that employees would not see their wages garnished.</p> <p>Inslee took to Twitter Thursday to say that was incorrect. The situation is this: Under the current law, employers must take the tax from their workers' paychecks starting next month, but the state will not be collecting that tax from employers. The hope is that the Legislature will amend the law and delay collection of the tax during the upcoming 60-day session.</p>

	<p>“As an employer, the state of WA is following the law and will have to begin collecting money from state employee paychecks on Jan. 1,” Inslee tweeted. “Many other private employers are doing the same, and others are hoping that the Legislature will change the law.”</p> <p>“However, if the Legislature fails to do so, employers will still be legally obligated to pay the full amount owed to state ESD to begin the long-term care program,” he added.</p> <p>Democratic leaders in the Legislature have promised to amend the law and delay collection of the tax while they make fixes. If they do, Inslee spokesperson Tara Lee said any money taken from employee paychecks between Jan. 1 and the time the Legislature changes the law will be refunded.</p> <p>The tax is meant to fund the state’s new long-term care benefit, known as the <a href="#">WA Cares Fund</a>. Established by the Legislature in 2019, it acts as a state-run long-term care insurance program. Starting in 2025, eligible adults will be able to access up to \$36,500 for long-term care costs such as delivered meals and in-home care.</p> <p>Millions of workers are subject to the tax, but the state gave all of them the <a href="#">chance to opt-out</a>. To do so, a worker had to have their own private long-term care insurance before Nov. 1. From there, they could apply for an exemption. More than 450,000 workers have so far applied for an exemption.</p>
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## Crime, Criminals

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HEADLINE	<b>12/27 Texas convenience store shooting: 3 dead</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.cnn.com/2021/12/27/us/garland-texas-convenience-store-shooting/index.html">https://www.cnn.com/2021/12/27/us/garland-texas-convenience-store-shooting/index.html</a>
GIST	<p>(CNN)Three people were fatally shot Sunday night at a convenience store in Garland, Texas, police said. A fourth victim was hospitalized in critical condition.</p> <p>Lt. Pedro Barineau with the Garland Police Department says surveillance video from the Texaco station showed a man leave a pickup truck and immediately begin firing after entering the store. He then returned to the truck, which was driven by another person.</p> <p>Neither the suspect nor the getaway driver has been identified.</p> <p>"This does not appear to be a robbery," Barrineau told CNN. He said investigators are not yet sure whether the shooter knew the victims.</p> <p>Garland is part of the north Texas "Metroplex," just northeast of Dallas.</p>
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HEADLINE	<b>12/26 Record high on-duty deaths police officers</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.newsmax.com/newsfront/lawenforcement-crime-policedeaths/2021/12/26/id/1050016/">https://www.newsmax.com/newsfront/lawenforcement-crime-policedeaths/2021/12/26/id/1050016/</a>
GIST	<p>2021 saw a record high number of on-duty deaths of police officers.</p> <p>The year's estimates range between 358 and 477 officers dying in the line of duty, an increase of about 30% over previous years.</p> <p>According to the <a href="#">Officer Down Memorial Page</a>, the cause of death varied; however, COVID-19 accounted for 67% of deaths this year.</p> <p>FBI <a href="#">data</a>, however, showed that as of Dec. 20, 69 officers suffered felonious deaths, up from 46 in 2020. The Fraternal Order of Police <a href="#">showed</a> that as of Nov. 30, 58 officers had been slain this year, almost three</p>

times the number in 2019. Ambush-style attacks on police skyrocketed by 126% from the same time last year.

Spikes in crime across U.S. cities have been cited as a major contributing factor. ABC News [reported](#) that homicides hit record highs in 12 major U.S. cities this year, including Philadelphia, Indianapolis and Rochester, New York.

"It's terrible to every morning get up and have to go look at the numbers and then look at the news and see the stories. It's just crazy. It's just crazy, and this needs to stop," Philadelphia Mayor Jim Kenney said regarding his city's homicide record.

Another cited factor is bail reform and the manner in which prosecutors in some cities handle certain crimes. Los Angeles Police Chief Michel Moore said that LA District Attorney George Gascón's policies are too soft on crime, especially his zero-bail policy.

"There are individuals in communities that look at that as a lack of consequences, a lack of deterrence and open season in which to go and commit these types of crimes. The crisis during COVID, while well-intended, the impact it had on the criminal justice system was significant and severe that it's developing another crisis in public safety," Moore [told](#) KNX radio.

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HEADLINE	<b>12/24 NY: falsifying vaccination cards a crime</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.infosecurity-magazine.com/news/ny-makes-falsifying-vaccination/">https://www.infosecurity-magazine.com/news/ny-makes-falsifying-vaccination/</a>
GIST	<p>The state of New York has passed a law that makes it a crime to falsify information on a COVID-19 vaccination card.</p> <p>New York governor Kathy Hochul <a href="#">signed</a> the new legislation on Wednesday that makes falsifying information on a COVID-19 vaccination card a Class D felony comparable under the New York Penal Law to promoting a sexual performance by a child, first-degree sexual abuse, second-degree assault and second-degree vehicular manslaughter.</p> <p>The <a href="#">legislation</a>, dubbed the "Truth in Vaccination" law, has also created a new Class E felony of computer tampering in the third degree "for intentional entering, alteration or destruction of 'computer material' regarding COVID-19 vaccine provisions."</p> <p>Under the New York Penal Law, other crimes recognized as Class E felonies include criminally negligent homicide, weapons possession on school grounds and third-degree rape.</p> <p><a href="#">Sentencing</a> for Class D felonies ranges from no prison time (with probation) to a maximum of seven years in prison. A New Yorker convicted of a Class E felony could receive a <a href="#">maximum</a> prison sentence of four years.</p> <p>The maximum fine that can be imposed for a Class D or Class E felony in New York is \$5,000 or double the amount of money that a defendant gained by committing their crime.</p> <p>Hochul <a href="#">said</a> that the legislation represented "a major step forward in the State's efforts to increase vaccination rates."</p> <p>"We need to make sure we learn the lessons of the pandemic so we don't make the same mistakes twice," Governor Hochul said. "These new laws will help us improve our response to the pandemic now, crack down on fraudulent use of vaccination records, and help us better understand the areas of improvement we need to make to our healthcare system so we can be even more prepared down the road."</p> <p>Hochul also signed legislation to give schools more access to New York's statewide Immunization Database.</p>

	Assembly member Jeffrey Dinowitz said: “This new law will undoubtedly help prosecutors and other law enforcement hold people accountable for the damage they are doing to public health by undermining the efficacy of vaccination requirements in workplaces, businesses, restaurants, and more.”
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HEADLINE	<b>12/26 Prosecutors expand use of RICO charges</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.wsj.com/articles/federal-prosecutors-are-using-a-law-intended-for-the-mob-in-unexpected-cases-11640527203?mod=hp_lead_pos6">https://www.wsj.com/articles/federal-prosecutors-are-using-a-law-intended-for-the-mob-in-unexpected-cases-11640527203?mod=hp_lead_pos6</a>
GIST	<p>Federal prosecutors around the country are increasingly using racketeering statutes to go after a broader array of criminal activity, applying them in ways that deviate from the law’s original goal of dismantling organized crime.</p> <p>The main federal racketeering statute, known as RICO—the Racketeer Influenced and Corrupt Organizations Act—allows law enforcement to stitch together offenses over time and present them in a single case, instead of prosecuting crimes independently.</p> <p>The law, passed in 1970, was used successfully early on to target the leaders of New York’s five organized crime families. Since then, it has been used effectively to target <a href="#">insider trading</a>, market manipulation and <a href="#">cybercrime</a>, even where defendants in some cases had never met each other.</p> <p>In the past three years, federal prosecutors have further expanded the types of cases targeted by the statute. Authorities in Boston pursued RICO charges in a nationwide <a href="#">college admissions cheating scheme</a>, securing two jury convictions and dozens of guilty pleas thus far; in Chicago, former traders at JPMorgan Chase &amp; Co. face racketeering charges in a case accusing them of commodities spoofing; and the U.S. attorney’s office in Brooklyn secured racketeering convictions against <a href="#">Nxivm sex cult founder Keith Raniere</a> and <a href="#">R&amp;B superstar R. Kelly</a>, both of whom were accused of running a criminal enterprise. Officials are also increasingly turning to RICO conspiracy laws to prosecute neighborhood street gangs.</p> <p>“Federal prosecutors have become more enamored with the RICO law’s ability to expand the story,” said James Trusty, former chief of the U.S. Justice Department’s Organized Crime and Gang division in Washington, D.C. Mr. Trusty said the statute effectively broadens what is considered criminal behavior under federal law and what is admissible in court. “You’re basically creating your own permission slip to introduce evidence of criminality,” he said, as opposed to having to rely on the go-ahead from judges.</p> <p>To prove a violation of RICO, prosecutors need to show that someone engaged in a pattern of racketeering activity connected to a criminal enterprise. The law requires proof that an enterprise existed and that a defendant committed at least two underlying acts within a 10-year period; these offenses can range from murder and assault to extortion and money laundering.</p> <p>Prosecutors can also separately charge conspiracy to violate RICO, which is a subsection of the RICO statute and contains different elements than a racketeering charge. A person can be convicted of RICO conspiracy without personally committing an underlying act. It is sufficient for prosecutors to prove that a defendant knew his co-conspirators were involved in criminal activity and agreed to participate in it.</p> <p>Michael Gerber, a former federal prosecutor who led Manhattan’s violent and organized crime unit, said that it is very helpful to prosecutors to be able to include the context and pattern of conduct when a criminal organization has engaged in multiple types of crime over time.</p> <p>“Sometimes, the U.S. attorney’s office can use those statutes to prosecute a murder or shooting and seek justice for the victim, when otherwise the crime would have gone uncharged forever,” he said.</p> <p>Some defense lawyers say that the expansion of RICO’s boundaries over time has also led to broad indictments that charge dozens of defendants at once, some of whom might have only been tangentially</p>

related to the central criminal activity. These cases, which can carry significant prison terms, violate due process and misuse a statute intended to prosecute traditional organized crime, said some defense lawyers.

Martín Sabelli, president of the National Association of Criminal Defense Lawyers, said that often people can be charged with tenuous connections to the racketeering activity even if they weren't present for, or didn't participate in, the underlying substantive crimes.

"This expansive use of a conspiracy theory hits people of color and the poor much more harshly, given the modern prosecutorial focus on gangs rather than organized crime," he said, particularly when street-crime prosecutions are packaged into federal RICO cases.

Among the people charged in these sweeping RICO conspiracy cases is Christopher Howard, 29 years old, who is scheduled to be resentenced in January.

In October 2017, Mr. Howard was included in a RICO case filed by federal prosecutors in Manhattan against 33 alleged members and associates of rival street gangs that had divided a Bronx-based housing complex into warring territories for years. Mr. Howard was indicted on one count of racketeering conspiracy relating to the gang activity. He was also indicted on one count of VICAR, a federal statute that targets violent crimes committed in aid of racketeering, and one related firearms charge, both of which involved the shooting a rival gang member in 2014. Mr. Howard's attorney said the incident wasn't motivated by gang affiliation.

A jury convicted Mr. Howard in March 2019, when prosecutors used social-media posts to show he knew and communicated with other gang members. But in testimony of cooperating witnesses, many said Mr. Howard didn't commit the racketeering acts in the indictment, including murders and drug sales.

Witnesses also testified that by 2014, when the shooting happened, tensions had subsided between the two gangs, according to court documents. Eight months later, a District Court judge set aside Mr. Howard's VICAR and firearms conviction, ruling that the shooting was personal and not committed in furtherance of the criminal enterprise, which the law requires.

In August, less than a year after Mr. Howard's release, a New York appeals court reinstated the guilty verdicts. He faces a mandatory minimum of 10 years and a maximum of up to life in prison at his resentencing.

John Diaz, who represented Mr. Howard, said the decision underscores the flexibility, breadth and danger of the RICO statutes.

"You personally don't have to commit overt acts," he said. "As long as you're aware of what's happening and adhere to it, the acts of others can be attributed to you."

Manhattan U.S. Attorney Damian Williams said that the investigation that led to Mr. Howard's indictment was initiated in response to an increase in shootings in the area.

"We will use every tool available to hold accountable those who seek to hurt and kill their neighbors," he said. The prosecution led to more than two dozen individuals pleading guilty or being convicted by a jury on at least 30 shootings, including the murder of an innocent bystander to gang violence.

In the trials of Messrs. Raniere and Kelly, viewed by lawyers as novel applications of the RICO statute, both men were accused of leading a criminal enterprise and using their inner circles to engage in illegal activity and recruit women and girls for sex.

Attorneys for Mr. Raniere and Mr. Kelly have each called the racketeering charges against their clients, respectively, a misapplication of the law.



	<p>During his closing argument, Marc Agnifilo, a lawyer for Mr. Raniere, told jurors that Mr. Raniere and his followers didn't have a common purpose, which the law requires to prove racketeering. He also said that the women freely chose to participate in sex acts.</p> <p>Other Nxivm members were charged for their roles in the group under RICO. In Mr. Kelly's case, the singer was the only individual who faced criminal prosecution.</p> <p>Steve Greenberg, Mr. Kelly's former attorney, said it was an abuse of the law to call Mr. Kelly's lifestyle and career a "criminal enterprise."</p> <p>"Prosecutors basically said his life was an enterprise," said Mr. Greenberg. "If they could have, they would have criminalized his going to the bathroom."</p> <p>Moira Penza, a former federal prosecutor in Brooklyn who handled RICO cases, said that the statutes were never intended to only be used in mafia cases.</p> <p>"Criminal enterprises go beyond traditional organized crime," she said. "Having RICO really allows a jury to see the way people like them operate and how it all fits together."</p>
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HEADLINE	<b>12/26 Paid experts exonerate in-custody deaths</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.nytimes.com/2021/12/26/us/police-deaths-in-custody-blame.html">https://www.nytimes.com/2021/12/26/us/police-deaths-in-custody-blame.html</a>
GIST	<p>When lawyers were preparing to defend against a lawsuit over a death in police custody in Fresno, Calif., they knew whom to call.</p> <p>Over the past two decades, Dr. Gary Vilke has established himself as a leading expert witness by repeatedly asserting that police techniques such as facedown restraints, stun gun shocks and some neck holds did not kill people.</p> <p>Officers in Fresno had handcuffed 41-year-old Joseph Perez and, holding him facedown on the ground, put a spinal board from an ambulance on his back as he cried out for help. One officer sat on the board as they strapped him to it. The county medical examiner ruled his death, in May 2017, a homicide by asphyxiation.</p> <p>Dr. Vilke, who was hired by the ambulance provider, charged \$500 an hour and provided a different determination. He wrote in a report filed with the court this past July that Mr. Perez had died from methamphetamine use, heart disease and the exertion of his struggle against the restraints.</p> <p>Dr. Vilke, an emergency medicine doctor in San Diego, is an integral part of a small but influential cadre of scientists, lawyers, physicians and other police experts whose research and testimony is almost always used to absolve officers of blame for deaths, according to a review of hundreds of research papers and more than 25,000 pages of court documents, as well as interviews with nearly three dozen people with knowledge of the deaths or the research.</p> <p>Their views infuriate many prosecutors, plaintiff lawyers, medical experts and relatives of the dead, who accuse them of slanting science, ignoring inconvenient facts and dangerously emboldening police officers to act aggressively. One of the researchers has suggested that police officers involved in the deaths are often unfairly blamed — like parents of babies who die of sudden infant death syndrome.</p> <p>The experts also intersect with law-enforcement-friendly companies that train police officers, write police policies and lend authority to studies rebutting concerns about police use of force.</p> <p>Together they form what often amounts to a cottage industry of exoneration. The dozen or so individuals and companies have collected millions of dollars over the past decade, much of it in fees that are largely underwritten by taxpayers, who cover the costs of police training and policies and the legal bills of accused officers.</p>

Many of the experts also have [ties to Axon, maker of the Taser](#): A lawyer for the company, for example, was an early sponsor of the Institute for the Prevention of In-Custody Deaths, a commercial undertaking that is among the police-friendly entities, and some of the experts have worked as consultants for Axon; another has served on Axon's corporate board.

The New York Times identified more than 100 instances of in-custody deaths or life-threatening injuries from the past 15 years in which experts in the network were hired to defend the police. The cases were nearly all civil lawsuits, as the officers involved were rarely charged with crimes. About two-thirds of the cases were settled out of court; of the 28 decided by judges or juries, 16 had outcomes favoring the police. (A handful of cases are pending.)

Beyond the courtroom, the individuals and businesses have offered instruction to thousands of police officers and medical examiners, whose cause-of-death rulings often help determine legal culpability. Lexipol, a Texas-based business whose webinars and publications have included experts from the network, boasts that it helped write policy manuals for 6,300 police departments, sometimes suggesting standards for officers' conduct that [reduce legal liability](#). A company spokeswoman said it did not rely on the researchers in making its policies.

The self-reinforcing ecosystem underscores the difficulty of obtaining an impartial accounting of deaths in police custody, particularly in cases involving a struggle, where the cause of death is not immediately clear. The Times reported earlier this year that [outside criminal investigations](#) of such cases can be plagued with shortcuts and biases that favor the police, and that [medical examiners](#) sometimes tie the deaths to a biological trait that would rarely be deemed fatal in other circumstances.

Some researchers and doctors in this ecosystem who responded to questions from The Times said they did not assist law enforcement but provided unbiased results of scientific research and opinions based on the facts of each case. Several pointed to research demonstrating that police struggles overall have an exceedingly low risk of death. They also highlighted health issues that could cause deaths in such circumstances, including drug use, obesity, psychological disturbances and genetic mutations that may predispose people to heart problems.

Some also criticized research and medical opinions that found that police techniques might cause or contribute to deaths, suggesting these were flawed. They also pointed out that other academic papers have been written by people who testify against law enforcement in such cases.

"Sensationalism, without offering scientifically demonstrated better control techniques, adds no benefit, and merely exacerbates the existing tensions between law enforcement and the society at large," said Mark Kroll, a biomedical engineer who has backed the idea of an "arrest related death syndrome" as an explanation of the deaths.

Others in the network, including Dr. Vilke, said it was wrong to characterize their work as favoring the police, and suggested The Times's analysis misrepresented it. "I would disagree," Dr. Vilke said when The Times shared its findings with him. Another of the experts, Dr. Steven Karch, sent papers suggesting Black males and people exerting themselves were generally more likely to have sudden cardiac death.

Lawyers for Derek Chauvin, the former Minneapolis police officer who was ultimately convicted in last year's murder of George Floyd, also drew upon the same network of researchers and experts. In particular, they turned to the defense of [prone restraint](#), a technique in which officers subdue subjects facedown, as happened to Mr. Floyd. The work of Dr. Kroll, who has a Ph.D in electrical engineering but no medical degree, was [cited by the Chauvin defense](#) as proof that putting body weight on someone facedown does not cause asphyxia.

The experts have been called on to defend a broad range of other police techniques, including Taser shocks and neck holds. Medical examiners and investigators have also relied on the research:

- Omaha police officers used a Taser 12 times when detaining Zachary Bear Heels in 2017 and punched him repeatedly in the head and neck. Dr. Kroll, who sits on Axon's corporate board, testified in the criminal trial that the stun gun could not have contributed to the death of Mr. Bear Heels, a 28-year-old with bipolar disorder and schizophrenia. He also wrote a report in the civil case that is under seal.
- Officers in Phoenix held Miguel Ruiz in a neck hold and shocked him multiple times with a stun gun in 2013. In a civil case, Dr. Vilke attested to the safety of neck holds that cut off blood flow to the head by compressing arteries, and another researcher, Dr. Charles Wetli, discussed excited delirium, a condition that some doctors say can suddenly kill drug users or the mentally ill.
- Sheriff's deputies in Kern County, Calif., handcuffed David Silva in 2013, bloodied him with batons, tied his hands and feet together behind his back, and pushed him facedown into the ground. Two physicians in the expert network, Dr. Karch and Dr. Theodore Chan, agreed with the coroner's finding that Mr. Silva did not asphyxiate; Dr. Chan cited studies he had done on the subject.

Dr. Chan, who works in San Diego with Dr. Vilke, is also serving as an expert witness in the lawsuit over the death of Mr. Perez in Fresno. Citing his own research, he stated that there was "no evidence" that such weight on a person's back could contribute to asphyxiation.

According to court documents, Mr. Perez had recently taken methamphetamines when police saw him behaving erratically. They handcuffed and tried to calm him, at one point putting a towel under him to keep him from injuring his face.

After an ambulance arrived, they placed a backboard on top of him and an officer sat on it. In a deposition, the officer said he had been trained that doing so posed no danger of asphyxia. A captain from the department said in the case that the training had relied on an article by Dr. Kroll.

"The problem is that when officers get sued in these cases," said Neil Gehlawat, the lawyer for Mr. Perez's family, the cadre of researchers insist that "'no one can die this way,' and then officers start to believe it."

Mr. Perez's sister, Michelle Perez, said that watching the video of his death was "terrifying" and that she didn't understand why officers would push him facedown and sit on him.

"I just kept thinking, 'Get off of him!'" she said. "There could have been some kind of different tactic."

### **Shaping the Science**

The physicians, scientists and researchers who come to the defense of law enforcement officers often cite experiments conducted on volunteers. They shock them with Tasers, douse them with pepper spray or restrain them facedown on the ground.

Their published findings are usually the same: that there is no evidence that the actions have enough of an effect to cause death.

A Times analysis of more than 230 scientific papers in the National Library of Medicine database published since the 1980s showed those conclusions to be significantly different from those published by others, including studies about restraints, body position and excited delirium.

Nearly three-quarters of the studies that included at least one author in the network supported the idea that restraint techniques were safe or that the deaths of people who had been restrained were caused by health problems. Only about a quarter of the studies that did not involve anyone from the network backed that conclusion. More commonly, the other studies said some restraint techniques [increased the risk](#) of death, if only by a small amount.

The few studies by the group that found problems with police techniques focused on deaths in which Tasers ignited gas fumes or caused people to fall and hit their heads.

Dr. Vilke's [first report](#) on police restraint was funded by a \$33,900 grant from San Diego County during a lawsuit over the 1994 death of Daniel Price. A woman reported seeing odd behavior from Mr. Price, 37, who had taken methamphetamines; officers restrained him facedown, his hands and feet tied together.

As part of their research, Dr. Vilke and others hogtied healthy volunteers. They observed that measurements of their lung functions decreased by up to 23 percent, which they concluded was not clinically significant because similar levels of diminished lung capacity could still be considered normal. The judge in the Price case cited the research when he dismissed the lawsuit.

The study and others have been challenged by some scholars and physicians because they are based on controlled conditions that are unlike real life, said Justin Feldman, a social epidemiologist at Harvard University who studies patterns of deaths in law enforcement custody.

"There's a fundamental problem in terms of study design," he said. "They're not using people with more severe mental and physical disabilities. They're not doing it with people who have taken drugs. When they're testing Tasers, they aren't using them as many times as you might see in some deaths."

When their studies appeared in peer-reviewed publications, the network of experts acknowledged that their work had limitations. But when discussing the research in court, or during trainings and elsewhere, some of them used more expansive language, did not mention conflicting work, or said they had fully refuted scholars who disagreed.

In the Fresno lawsuit and others, for example, Dr. Chan repeatedly wrote that Dr. Donald Reay, a former medical examiner in King County, Wash., had concluded that hogtying "does not produce any serious or life-threatening respiratory effects" — omitting the crucial phrase "in normal individuals." Other physicians in the network consistently left off that phrase when repeating the quote, although Dr. Reay maintained that such restraints could be fatal in some instances.

Dr. Chan did not respond to a question about the quotation.

Papers by researchers outside the network were more frequently balanced — finding, for example, that [some restraint positions](#) are generally safe while others can cause statistically significant changes in breathing. [Another recent paper](#) used new computer imaging technology to measure lung function and found that it was affected during restraint.

In their own writings and when asked about these papers, some scientists in the network dismissed them. They said papers that found "statistically significant" effects were inadequate because the changes were not "clinically significant" enough to be considered health problems in the participants.

(Some other scientists said choosing test subjects who would be more likely to face such distress would generally not be ethically permitted in experiments.) They said some experiments with Tasers on animals could not be used to draw conclusions about humans. And several suggested that some of the other papers should be scrutinized because they were written by doctors who testified against police.

Dr. Kroll said in a 2019 webinar that "the science has completely debunked" the claim that pushing someone facedown could contribute to asphyxiation. In the session, conducted by Lexipol and titled "Arrest Related Deaths: Managing Your Medical Examiner," he suggested that such deaths were outside the control of officers.

"Decades ago we used to prosecute mothers for crib deaths and sudden infant death syndrome, and then we figured out it really wasn't their fault," he said at one point in the training session, adding later: "Hopefully in the future we'll have something like sudden infant death syndrome, just 'arrest related death syndrome' so we don't have to automatically blame the police officer."

A spokeswoman for Lexipol, which was co-founded by a lawyer who had previously hired Dr. Chan to defend police officers, said an upcoming webinar would discuss recent court rulings that found extended prone restraint to be excessive force in some circumstances.

“We are not in the business of determining such science-based decisions” about whether prone restraint is dangerous, the spokeswoman, Shannon Pieper, said in an email.

Some of the scientists are fierce defenders of their approach, vigorously challenging anyone who suggests an alternative finding. They submit letters to the editors of medical journals that publish the opposing research, discredit it in textbooks they write and routinely dismiss it as “junk science” in public forums.

One cardiologist, Dr. Peyman Azadani, said in an interview that he was intimidated by the pushback. In a 2011 [academic paper](#), he reviewed studies by authors associated with Taser and found they were far more likely than others to conclude that the devices were safe.

Dr. Azadani said two people who identified themselves as being affiliated with Taser had approached him about the research during a medical conference.

“They knew everything about my background, and they told me I was destroying my future,” he recalled.

Having recently immigrated from Iran at the time, Dr. Azadani was concerned about making waves, he said, so he removed his name from subsequent papers and then changed research subjects.

In a statement, Axon said it had no information about the incident but did not condone such behavior. The company said it promoted research into its devices out of a concern for safety, and Dr. Kroll, who makes more than \$300,000 a year as a member of Axon’s corporate board, pointed to [a more recent study](#) that found no correlation between Taser funding and safety determination.

### **A Network Forms**

Dr. Wetli, a former Miami medical examiner who died last year, was among the first to publish research that launched what has become an industry of sorts defending police officers. He wrote in the 1980s about men who had taken cocaine and died, many while being subdued by the police. He attributed the deaths to a condition he called excited delirium, when someone becomes aggressive from a mental illness or psychoactive drugs.

Later, in 1994, two former law enforcement officers, Michael A. Brave and John G. Peters Jr., [described in a paper](#) what they called custody death syndrome. The condition, they wrote, had “no apparent detectable anatomical cause” but could be associated with excited delirium or other vague diagnoses.

In describing the death of a hypothetical suspect, they focused on potential liability: “You immediately cringe at the thought of the critical scrutiny you will soon be facing by the media, by council officials and by special interest groups,” they wrote.

The two men later became affiliated with both the Institute for the Prevention of In-Custody Deaths and Americans for Effective Law Enforcement, another group that provides legal resources for officers. Mr. Brave also became a lawyer for Taser.

In the early 2000s, as Tasers were adopted more widely, studies about them proliferated. A group of researchers led by Dr. Jeffrey Ho in Minneapolis pioneered the work. In their initial study, funded in part by Taser, they shocked volunteers for five seconds and concluded that measurements of heart health did not change.

For years, [Dr. Ho has worked](#) in emergency medicine at Hennepin Healthcare, as a part-time sheriff’s deputy and, until 2019, as the medical director for Axon.

Taser was also present at the creation of the Institute for the Prevention of In-Custody Deaths, which was founded in 2005 by Mr. Peters.

In an interview, Mr. Peters said he started the business because so many deaths were being blamed on Tasers, which he characterized as one of many misguided criticisms of police conduct. The institute conducts research and training that often rebuts the criticism and is one of several commercial forums that draw like-minded researchers about law enforcement behavior.

“When we first started teaching this stuff back in the ’90s, it was all pepper spray deaths,” he said. “Well, then they did the science and showed that of all the people who died, only two may have been associated with pepper spray. So that issue went away. Then positional asphyxia popped up. So we did a little bit of work in that area and then that quieted down.”

Taser provided some early funding to the institute in exchange for training programs, Mr. Peters said, and one of its initial sponsors was Mr. Brave, who joined Taser’s legal department around the same time.

“We put him on the board the first year so we would have a connection to information at Taser,” Mr. Peters said.

The institute had also worked closely with Deborah C. Mash, a neuroscientist who has written papers about excited delirium. When Dr. Mash was affiliated with the University of Miami, Mr. Peters and Taser representatives recommended that medical examiners send brain tissue samples from people who had died in police custody to her lab for testing. The Times found a handful of instances in which medical examiners relied on these test results to determine that someone had died of excited delirium as well as one case in which the results were used to rule it out.

Dr. Mash left the university in 2018. In an email to The Times, she said she tells officers that excited delirium is a medical emergency and that the proper response is to immediately request emergency medical help.

Another private company that lends expert support for the police, the [Force Science Institute](#), has promoted research and commentary by Dr. Kroll, including a [paper](#) he wrote with Mr. Brave and Dr. Karch that tested law enforcement officers pressing their knees into a prone person’s back. They said their results did not support the theory that this could cause asphyxia.

The business of supporting law enforcement can be lucrative. Not all of the researchers testify frequently in court, but when they do, experts associated with the network typically earn \$500 to \$1,000 an hour for testimony and depositions. Lexipol charges [thousands of dollars](#) to review and write policies for police departments. The Institute for the Prevention of In-Custody Deaths also charges for its training programs and promotes its business partners.

At the institute’s annual conference in Las Vegas last month, law enforcement officers, lawyers and physicians attended presentations, some by experts in the network, on such topics as ways to subdue or restrain a suspect, and how to manage publicity when someone is injured or dies in custody. The price of admission: \$695.

### **One-Sided Track Record**

The Times found that, with rare exceptions, when members of this network weigh in on a case in court, they side with the police.

In court documents and testimony, some of them have acknowledged their one-sided track record.

“That’s like trying to retain Columbus to testify that the Earth is flat,” Dr. Tom Neuman, a retired emergency medicine physician in San Diego, said in 2018 when asked if relatives of people who had died in police custody would ever hire him as an expert.



In a deposition this past summer, Dr. Vilke said it had been 20 years since he had last testified that an officer was likely to have contributed to a death. In an email to The Times, he said that he had “no independent recall” about specific earlier work, and “would disagree” that his work over the past 20 years almost always found that law enforcement was not to blame.

Mr. Peters, who founded the training institute, is an exception. He has testified regularly on behalf of people harmed in police encounters, or their families, but his testimony has been limited to whether police procedures were followed. After Mr. Floyd was killed in Minneapolis, Mr. Peters released a video statement saying that putting a knee on a someone’s neck should not be permitted under any use-of-force policy.

Making determinations on death-in-custody cases is a complex and inexact process. The people being detained in the instances reviewed by The Times were often on drugs or in psychological distress, and some had severe medical conditions.

But in death after death, The Times found, actions by law enforcement officers fell well outside the controlled conditions in the research the experts cited to exonerate them. Occasionally, the experts used identical language in different cases to rebut allegations and suggest alternative explanations for the deaths. They also emphasized common ailments like heart disease, or leaned heavily on the poorly understood notion of excited delirium.

In 2010, officers in Palm Desert, Calif., responding to a 911 call found 48-year-old Robert Appel delusional. Multiple officers pinned him facedown with their knees. When they turned him over after what the officers described as a short time, he was dead. Dr. Vilke blamed cardiac arrest caused by undiagnosed kidney failure.

Mathew Ajibade hit his girlfriend in January 2015 while experiencing what his family described as a manic bipolar episode. Deputies in Savannah, Ga., beat him, handcuffed him, put him in a restraint chair with a spit mask over his face and shocked him four times in the groin with a Taser.

Dr. Mash and Dr. Wetli both reported that the actions had not led to Mr. Ajibade’s death. Dr. Mash blamed natural causes associated with his bipolar disorder and said he exhibited signs of excited delirium, while Dr. Wetli said it was related to [sickle cell trait](#), a typically benign condition in which a person carries one of the two genes that together cause sickle cell disease.

Assessing the effectiveness of the opinions exonerating the police is difficult because most cases settle or are decided without explanation.

But several cases reviewed by The Times suggest that the research has had far-reaching effects — influencing investigator decisions in death inquests and giving officers assurance that their methods are safe. Some of the experts’ legal statements and educational materials they have prepared for police called safety warnings by Taser and other law enforcement groups outdated or needlessly conservative.

In a deposition in April, the sheriff in Riverside County, Calif., cited studies backed by the law-enforcement-leaning experts to explain why his deputies held people facedown after handcuffing them. The sheriff, Chad Bianco, described the position as “the absolute safest place for any subject.”

Two years ago, deputies working for Sheriff Bianco found Kevin Niedzialek, 34, bleeding from a head wound and behaving strangely after taking methamphetamines. They shocked him twice with a Taser, and held him facedown.

When they rolled him onto his back, Mr. Niedzialek was unresponsive. He died the next day.

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HEADLINE	12/25 LAPD investigates shooting: 14yr-old killed
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.cbsnews.com/news/los-angeles-police-shooting-killed-14-year-old-girl-burlington-investigation/">https://www.cbsnews.com/news/los-angeles-police-shooting-killed-14-year-old-girl-burlington-investigation/</a>

GIST	<p>The Los Angeles Police Department officer who opened fire on a suspect in a Burlington store in North Hollywood on Thursday has been placed on leave as officials investigate the shooting that <a href="#">killed a 14-year-old girl</a>, CBS Los Angeles <a href="#">reports</a>.</p> <p>The investigation has been handed to the California Department of Justice under a new law that requires any deadly shooting at the hands of an officer — intentional or not — to be investigated by the state's attorney general.</p> <p>Police responded to the store Thursday morning after several 911 calls reported possible shots fired. They encountered a suspect who allegedly attacked a woman with a heavy-duty bike lock, leaving her head and face bloodied.</p> <p>LAPD Chief of Police Michel Moore told CBS LA that one officer fired three rounds. The assault suspect, later identified as 24-year-old Daniel Elena Lopez, was shot in the chest and died at the scene.</p> <p>The girl, Valentina Orellana-Peralta, was in a dressing room when one of the bullets passed through the wall and struck her in the chest, killing her. According to The Los Angeles Times, she was there trying on dresses for her quinceañera with her mother.</p> <p>No gun was found on the suspect. LAPD Assistant Chief Dominic Choi said, "Preliminarily, we believe that round [that killed Orellana-Peralta] was an officer's round."</p> <p>Moore said the LAPD was doing "everything we can to gather as much and be as transparent as possible" as the investigation proceeds.</p> <p>He called for the swift release of body-cam footage, store surveillance video and recordings of all 911 calls concerning the incident by no later than Monday, a process that normally takes up to 45 days.</p> <p>Moore has previously said that use of deadly force is always a last resort for LAPD officers, but at least one bystander criticized the tactics used by the officers at the store.</p> <p>"They should've taken care of it differently. I mean, not where everybody was in danger," Nubia Cisneros told CBS LA reporter Jasmine Viel.</p>
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HEADLINE	<b>12/26 Venezuela migrants fall prey sex traffickers</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.wsj.com/articles/venezuelan-migrants-fall-prey-to-sex-traffickers-after-fleeing-their-collapsing-country-11640514604?mod=hp_lead_pos8">https://www.wsj.com/articles/venezuelan-migrants-fall-prey-to-sex-traffickers-after-fleeing-their-collapsing-country-11640514604?mod=hp_lead_pos8</a>
GIST	<p>QUITO, Ecuador—On her first day at what she thought would be a job mopping floors, a Venezuelan migrant named Patricia, who at home had sold fish from a market stall, found herself trapped inside what turned out to be a brothel.</p> <p>Kept prisoner for two months, she received food and fresh lingerie during the day through a tiny window in her room. At night, she said, a string of men arrived demanding sex. One client stabbed her in the left arm when she insisted he use a condom.</p> <p>"I never thought something like this would happen to me," said Patricia, a 36-year-old mother of two, recounting her escape from the brothel in Colombia and her flight to Ecuador. The Wall Street Journal agreed to use only her first name.</p> <p>While sex trafficking is a global problem, human-rights advocates say it has become especially acute in recent years among migrants who have fled dictatorship and the economic crisis in Venezuela. Government officials and rights groups in the Andean region say the traffickers exploit the exodus of nearly six million people from Venezuela—the world's largest continuing refugee crisis, in number of migrants fleeing, after Syria—by coercing some into sexual bondage with bogus job offers.</p>

The pandemic has made things worse, with traffickers recruiting women along clandestine trails that Venezuelans use because of the closing of national borders for much of the past two years, said Coralia Sáenz, who tracks regional trafficking of women from the Quito office of the International Organization for Migration, a United Nations body.

Sex trafficking and the prostitution it drives operate in the shadows. Venezuelan migrants almost never report it. Often, they are too ashamed or fear reprisals from the trafficking gangs or deportation because they lack legal status, said Daniel Palacios, interior minister in Colombia, home to two million Venezuelan migrants, more than any other country.

He said Colombian authorities had been investigating 60 cases reported in the first nine months of 2021 in which sex traffickers victimized Venezuelan migrants. That compares with five reported cases in 2017.

“The crime is massively underreported,” Mr. Palacios said. Even so, he added, “You see an exponential increase in cases as the situation in Venezuela gets worse.”

Like many Venezuelan migrants, Patricia, who ended up in the Colombian brothel, fled her country because of hunger, hyperinflation and unemployment caused by an 80% economic contraction over seven years.

She was selling coffee on the streets of Bogotá last December when a woman approached and told her about a restaurant job. The woman bought her a bus ticket and accompanied her to Cali in southwest Colombia, while Patricia’s children remained with relatives in Bogotá. But once inside a bar that also serves as a bordello, Patricia said, two burly men forced her to a back room and locked the door.

“I began screaming but they said, ‘Don’t you know why you were brought here?’” she recalled after resettling in Quito with the help of Hummingbird Wings, a group that helps victims of sexual slavery.

María Elena Guamán, the group’s spokeswoman, said the privation generated by the pandemic left many women more willing to accept spurious employment and marriage proposals advertised by traffickers on social media sites.

“They find your weak spot,” Ms. Guamán said. “If your dream is to study, they will offer a scholarship. If you need work, they’ll offer jobs. If you need clothes, they’ll get them. It never occurs to victims that they are being recruited.”

In the Colombian city of Barranquilla, the owner of an online pornography business dressed up like a priest then lured Venezuelans to his house, saying it was a migrant shelter. Police later said they found 30 Venezuelans who said they had been forced to perform sexual acts in front of webcams.

In March, Colombian police rescued seven Venezuelan women who had been promised jobs as bar waitresses in a farm town near the Venezuelan border. They had arrived malnourished but were fed ample meals and given beauty makeovers, said Edwin Méndez, a Colombian police agent who investigated the case. Then, the migrants were told that they each owed more than \$1,000 for room, board and transportation and would have to pay off their debts by selling their bodies.

“If there were complaints from clients, the women would be fined, which put them even deeper in debt,” said Mr. Méndez in recounting the case, which led to eight arrests. “They were treated like animals.”

Earlier this year, the Renacer Foundation, which works to prevent sexual exploitation of minors, found in the Colombian border town of Maico that “48 of the 50 prostitutes we met were Venezuelans,” said Viviana Blanco, a psychologist for the group. “In some communities there are no Colombian prostitutes because they’ve all been displaced by Venezuelans,” she said.

Ms. Blanco said it is hard to tell how many are victims of sex trafficking. She said that when migrants are living in the streets, some end up selling their bodies for food or just to spend a night indoors.

“It’s called survival sex,” she said.

Neighboring Ecuador is now home to about a half million Venezuelans who were attracted by the country’s relatively stable, dollar-based economy. But after falling on hard times, some turn to prostitution.

“I don’t want to do this,” said a 22-year-old Venezuelan woman who arrived in Quito earlier this year after fleeing her country. A Venezuelan friend who was a sex worker in Ecuador helped her get into that line of work after she was unable to make a decent living doing ordinary work in Colombia. As she took a break at a bordello where she earns \$15 per customer, she said: “The other girls here move in on clients and dance for them and sit on top of them. But I don’t like it. I just want to go home,” referring to Colombia, where she has relatives.

Rather than sophisticated transnational crime organizations, most sex trafficking rings that exploit Venezuelans are local groups made up of just a few people, said Col. José Restrepo, assistant director of Colombia’s investigative police agency. The traffickers are often acquaintances or even relatives of the victims.

One Venezuelan migrant, Roxana Guevara, 18, recalled how, about three years ago, a cousin persuaded her to move to Lumbaquí, a village in the jungles of northern Ecuador. Ms. Guevara knew her cousin was a sex worker but said she had promised to pay the teenager—who was 15 at the time—for babysitting her children.

But the cousin began pressuring Ms. Guevara to join her as a sex worker in Lumbaquí’s main bordello, noting that clients would pay more for sex with a minor. One night, her cousin gave her a drink that caused her to pass out, Ms. Guevara said. She woke up the next morning naked and alone in a hotel room.

“My cousin had sold me for a lot of money,” Ms. Guevara said at the Hummingbird Wings office in Quito. “I had been raped.”

She then began working at the bordello, her cousin having threatened to kick her out of the house if she refused. A police station stood blocks away, but Ms. Guevara said the brothel owners threatened to kill her if she sought help. Finally, her mother traveled to Ecuador last year to rescue her.

On the rare occasions when victims report the crime, their harrowing accounts are sometimes dismissed by local authorities because of bias against foreigners, said Humberto Ramírez, a lawyer who provides legal advice to Venezuelan migrants in Ecuador. Prosecutors often charge suspects with other offenses, such as rape or kidnapping, because it can be harder to secure convictions for sex trafficking. That makes the crime less visible.

“Instead of calling someone a victim of sex trafficking, a prosecutor will contend she was raped 54 times,” said Mr. Ramírez.

Verónica Rosero, a public prosecutor in Ecuador, said that migrants are usually on the move and even those who denounce sex trafficking rarely stick around to provide testimony in long, drawn-out legal cases. Most, she said, are simply relieved to have escaped.

Among the survivors is Patricia, the Venezuelan who was trapped in the bordello in Cali. She never reported the crime against her for fear the people who held her captive would come after her.

Patricia, who is now reunited with her two children, recounted how she thought she’d be kept as a sex slave for years. She then recalled a film in which the heroine escapes from a brothel after earning the trust of her captors.

	<p>Inspired, Patricia began chatting with the bordello manager, who allowed her to run errands. During one of the outings, she dashed away.</p> <p>“I ran really hard because I thought they would come after me,” she said. “I ran and ran and ran.”</p>
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HEADLINE	<b>12/25 Armed intruder arrested at Windsor Castle</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2021/dec/25/armed-intruder-arrested-at-windsor-castle-as-queen-celebrates-christmas">https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2021/dec/25/armed-intruder-arrested-at-windsor-castle-as-queen-celebrates-christmas</a>
GIST	<p>An armed man was arrested after attempting to break into Windsor Castle where the Queen was celebrating Christmas with her family.</p> <p>Police said the intruder was carrying an offensive weapon but did not break into any buildings on Christmas Day morning.</p> <p>The suspect was being held in custody and the royals had been informed, Thames Valley police said.</p> <p>A 19-year-old man from Southampton was arrested on suspicion of breach or trespass of a protected site and possession of an offensive weapon, they added.</p> <p>Officers from Thames Valley and the Metropolitan police responded to a security breach at around 8.30am within the grounds of the castle in Berkshire.</p> <p>The Sunday Mirror said the arrest came after security controllers monitoring CCTV spotted a man carrying what appeared to be a crossbow.</p> <p>The Mail on Sunday said sources suggested the man was armed with a crossbow and used a rope ladder to scale a metal fence.</p> <p>Police did not confirm what the weapon was and it is not known where exactly the man was on the grounds and how close he got to the castle itself.</p> <p>Supt Rebecca Mears said: “An investigation is ongoing following this incident and we are working with colleagues from the Metropolitan police.</p> <p>“The man has been arrested on suspicion of breach or trespass of a protected site and possession of an offensive weapon. He remains in custody at this time.</p> <p>“We can confirm security processes were triggered within moments of the man entering the grounds and he did not enter any buildings.</p> <p>“Members of the royal family have been informed about the incident. We do not believe there is a wider danger to the public.”</p> <p>The Queen was celebrating Christmas at Windsor with Prince Charles and his wife, Camilla, in the first year since the death of her husband, the Duke of Edinburgh.</p> <p>Charles, Camilla, Edward and Sophie, along with their children Louise and James, attended a church service in St George’s Chapel, in the castle grounds, at 10.45am on Christmas Day.</p>
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HEADLINE	<b>12/24 Ex-NY gov ‘unwanted touch’: not criminal</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2021/dec/24/andrew-cuomo-wont-be-charged-touching-state-trooper">https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2021/dec/24/andrew-cuomo-wont-be-charged-touching-state-trooper</a>

GIST	<p>Former New York governor Andrew Cuomo won't face criminal charges after a female state trooper said she felt "completely violated" by his unwanted touching at an event in September 2019, a Long Island prosecutor announced.</p> <p>Acting Nassau county district attorney Joyce Smith said in a statement that an investigation found the allegations against Cuomo "credible, deeply troubling, but not criminal under New York law".</p> <p>Smith opened the investigation after details of the encounter appeared in state attorney general Letitia James' August report on sexual harassment allegations against Cuomo.</p> <p>The report chronicled accusations from 11 women and led to Cuomo's resignation from office, though he has attacked the findings as biased and inaccurate.</p> <p>A message seeking comment was left with Cuomo's spokesperson.</p> <p>According to James' report, the trooper said Cuomo ran the palm of his left hand across her abdomen, to her belly button and then to her right hip, where she kept her gun, while she held a door open for him as he left an event at Belmont Park, Long Island, on 23 September 2019.</p> <p>Cuomo was at the state-owned racetrack, home to the last leg of horse racing's Triple Crown, to break ground on a new arena for the National Hockey League's New York Islanders nearby.</p> <p>The trooper, a member of Cuomo's security detail, told James' investigators that Cuomo's conduct at the event made her feel "completely violated because to me, like that's between my chest and my privates".</p> <p>James' report said that although the trooper was upset by Cuomo's unwanted touching, she did not feel she could do anything about it.</p> <p>"I'm a trooper, newly assigned to the travel team. Do I want to make waves? No," she said, according to the report. "I've heard horror stories about people getting kicked off the detail or transferred over like little things. ... I had no plans to report it."</p> <p>The trooper told James' investigators that what happened at Belmont Park was just one of many instances of Cuomo's "flirtatious" and "creepy" behavior toward her.</p> <p>One time, in an elevator, he traced his finger from her neck to her back, she said. Another time, he asked to kiss her in the driveway outside his Mount Kisco home, she said.</p> <p>"I remember just freezing, being – in the back of my head, I'm like, oh, how do I say no politely?" she told investigators.</p> <p>The Nassau county investigation was limited to the encounter at Belmont Park.</p> <p>In October, the Albany county sheriff's office filed a misdemeanor groping complaint against Cuomo, but a week later the district attorney asked a judge for more time to evaluate the evidence.</p> <p>Cuomo's scheduled arraignment in that case is due 7 January.</p>
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HEADLINE	<b>12/24 Chicago-area mall shootout; 4 injured</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.seattletimes.com/nation-world/nation/police-search-for-gunman-in-chicago-area-mall-shootout/">https://www.seattletimes.com/nation-world/nation/police-search-for-gunman-in-chicago-area-mall-shootout/</a>
GIST	OAK BROOK, Ill. — Police said Friday that they were searching for a man suspected of taking part in a shootout at a crowded suburban Chicago shopping mall in which four people were wounded, including another suspected gunman who was taken into custody.



	<p>The shootout at the Oakbrook Center in Oak Brook was between two men who apparently knew each other, Oak Brook police Chief James Kruger said. It happened at around 5:45 p.m. Thursday in a corridor of the mall, which was crowded with Christmas shoppers.</p> <p>The suspected gunman who was in custody underwent surgery for gunshot wounds to his legs and back and was expected to survive, police said. Three women who were bystanders suffered non-life-threatening wounds to their legs or feet and a fourth woman broke her ankle while fleeing, said police.</p> <p>“This is just a very unfortunate incident that is completely out of character for our area,” Kruger said.</p> <p>The outdoor mall is a major shopping destination about 15 miles (24 kilometers) west of Chicago.</p> <p>Around 100 police officers, including SWAT teams, rushed to the mall and went store to store in search of the other shooter, Kruger said.</p> <p>Alex Gay, 23, said she was walking in the mall when she suddenly saw people running. She didn’t hear any gunshots.</p> <p>“I’m shook up,” Gay said. “It was scary. Everyone was sprinting out of the mall as sirens went over intercom saying, ‘Emergency. Evacuate. Seek shelter.’ I almost got trampled.”</p> <p>Kruger said he expected the mall would reopen Friday with an increased police presence.</p>
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HEADLINE	<b>12/25 Farms labor smuggling, trafficking network</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2021/dec/25/us-farms-made-200m-human-smuggling-labor-trafficking-operation">https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2021/dec/25/us-farms-made-200m-human-smuggling-labor-trafficking-operation</a>
GIST	<p>In June 2021, a farm worker from Mexico who requested to remain anonymous for fear of retaliation, was transported through a trafficking network from Monterey, Mexico to work on farms in the southern US state of <a href="#">Georgia</a>.</p> <p>They paid 20,000 pesos, around \$950 to the traffickers that they were loaned from their mother, taking frequent trips to Monterrey, <a href="#">Mexico</a>, back and forth, before being told it was safe to leave and they were finally transported across the border.</p> <p>Initially, the worker was told they would be working on a blueberry farm, but was sent to a corn farming operation instead.</p> <p>“We arrived at the house where we would live and had to clean the rooms ourselves. There were roaches, spiders, mosquitoes, and the mattresses were covered in lice,” the worker said. “The bathrooms and showers were dirty and clogged. The kitchen was horrible. We had no air conditioning in hot weather.”</p> <p>The worker started work daily at 3 or 4am and worked until 3 or 4pm with just one 15-minute lunch break, making just \$225 for 15 days of work. They heard rumors that the contractor had several workers die under them due to exploitation and the worker claimed that Haitian immigrants were also brought into the same network.</p> <p>After 20 days at the corn farm, the worker was sent to a cucumber warehouse where they weren’t paid anything for their work, and then transferred to <a href="#">Texas</a> before escaping the operation and returning to Mexico in July 2021.</p> <p>“There was a lot of abuse for little pay,” the worker added. “It was a total fraud.”</p> <p>The contractor the worker said he worked under, JC Longoria Castro, was one of two dozen defendants <a href="#">indicted</a> on federal conspiracy charges in October 2021 based on findings from a multi-year</p>

long investigation into a massive human smuggling and labor trafficking operation based in southern Georgia that extended to Florida and Texas.

The indictments characterized the operation as “modern-day slavery”, a [longstanding issue](#) in the US agricultural industry where workers were smuggled in from Central American countries to the US and imprisoned as contracted farm workers.

Farmworkers in the US, especially immigrant workers, have few protections in the US. They were [excluded](#) from the National Labor Relations Act passed in 1935 and the Fair Labor Standards Act of 1938. Workers in America’s agricultural fields are regularly subjected to abuses ranging from [high occurrences of sexual assault and harassment](#), [wage theft](#) and [safety issues](#) including injuries, fatalities on the job, and exposure to hazardous chemicals.

The investigation, [Operation Blooming Onion](#), found the conspirators forced workers to pay fees for transportation to the US, food, and housing through the H2-A work visa program, while withholding their travel and identification documents and forcing them to work for little to no pay in inhumane living conditions.

The two dozen conspirators made \$200m from their operation, laundering the money through land, homes, over a dozen vehicles, the purchase of a restaurant and nightclub, and through a casino. Over 100 workers were freed from the operation.

The H2-A visa program is an often used avenue for [exploitation](#) of migrant workers in the US, as it ties immigration status to employment on a temporary basis with no pathways to permanent citizenship. Many of these workers are forced to take on debt to recruiters to enter the H2-A visa program, with [several cases](#) of debt peonage, forced labor, and human trafficking reported through the program.

“It’s really the structure of the program that facilitates this kind of stuff happening, often with impunity,” said Daniel Costa, director of Immigration Law and Policy Research at the Economic Policy Institute.

He cited a severe lack of labor law enforcement in the agricultural industry as a driving factor in widespread abuses of workers and the lack of regulating recruiters outside of the US who connect migrant workers with temporary jobs in the US. Inspections conducted by the wage and hour division of the US Department of Labor [declined](#) significantly over the past few decades due to underfunding and the low number of inspectors responsible for overseeing a vast number of employers.

“If you’re an agricultural employer, there’s only around a 1% chance that you’ll be investigated for anything in any given year, so they can pretty much get away with not treating your workers the way they should,” added Costa.

The workers were threatened with deportation or violence if they did not comply with the conspirators. The indictments include allegations of “raping, kidnapping and threatening or attempting to kill some of the workers or their families, and in many cases sold or traded the workers to other conspirators”. At least two workers died as a result of the living and working conditions and another was repeatedly raped.

Some of the workers were promised up to \$12 an hour in pay, but instead were ordered by armed overseers to dig up onions by hand for \$0.20 per bucket.

A grand jury indicted the 24 conspirators in a federal court in Waycross, Georgia on counts including forced labor, mail fraud, witness tampering and conspiracy to commit money laundering. Arraignments in the case were scheduled for 21 December and 6 January at the Southern District of Georgia federal courthouse in Waycross, Georgia.

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SOURCE	<a href="https://abcnews.go.com/International/wireStory/sri-lankan-cop-fatally-shoots-officers-war-zone-81936829">https://abcnews.go.com/International/wireStory/sri-lankan-cop-fatally-shoots-officers-war-zone-81936829</a>
GIST	<p>COLOMBO, Sri Lanka -- A policeman opened fire on a group of fellow officers in Sri Lanka, killing four of them and wounding three others, a police spokesman said Saturday.</p> <p>The shooting occurred Friday night inside a police station in the small town of Thirukkivil in eastern Sri Lanka, a police statement said. The town is located in the island's former war zone, which has been largely peaceful since the civil war ended in 2009. The town is about 336 kilometers (208 miles) east of the capital Colombo.</p> <p>The officer in charge of the police station was among the wounded who were rushed to a hospital.</p> <p>The police sergeant who carried out the shooting has been arrested after he surrendered to a separate police station and handed over two T-56 assault rifles and ammunition, police spokesman Nihal Thalduwa said.</p> <p>The motive for the shooting was not immediately known.</p> <p>A police team headed by a senior officer in the area has been deployed to probe the incident, Thalduwa said.</p>
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HEADLINE	<b>12/24 Tourist drug demand brings cartel violence</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2021/12/24/mexico-cancun-tourism-cartel-violence/">https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2021/12/24/mexico-cancun-tourism-cartel-violence/</a>
GIST	<p>PUERTO MORELOS, Mexico — The trouble began, as it often does here, when tourists asked the hotel staff to help them buy cocaine.</p> <p>It's a common enough request across Mexico's Mayan Riviera that the employees of the Hyatt Ziva knew how to accommodate their clientele. They called a few local drug dealers, according to security officials who investigated the incident.</p> <p>But the dealers who arrived at the beachside resort outside Cancún last month came from rival cartels, part of the kaleidoscope of criminal groups who have converged on Mexico's busiest tourist corridor. Within minutes, shooting began. Security footage shows the attackers sprinting from the beach toward the \$400-a-night hotel, and tourists in bathing suits seeking cover in hallways.</p> <p>"It was more proof that the only reason the cartels are here is because of the enormous demand for drugs, especially among tourists," said Lucio Hernández Gutiérrez, the security chief for Mexico's Quintana Roo state. "It's a very difficult thing to stop."</p> <p>The hotel denies that its staff should be blamed for the attack.</p> <p>"To suggest that our associates were, in any way, involved or bear a level of responsibility for an incident that began on a public beach is unfounded and without merit," said Dean Sullivan, a spokesman for Playa Hotels &amp; Resorts, which manages the Hyatt.</p> <p>In recent weeks, some of the most famous destinations along Mexico's Caribbean coast have seen alarming displays of violence, still-rare collisions between the country's profound security problems and its glittering tourist attractions. Many have pointed to those incidents as illustration of Mexico's lawlessness. But Mexican officials say that critique fails to account for the way tourists' increasing demand for drugs has emboldened the cartels that sell to them.</p> <p>In Tulum, a German and Indian tourist were killed by gunmen in October. In November, the shootout at the Hyatt spared tourists, but left two apparent cartel members dead. This month, gunmen arrived at a well-known Cancún beach on water scooters in another apparent targeted killing attempt. They fired their weapons before taking off into the Caribbean. No one was wounded.</p>

In response to the series of incidents, Mexico this month launched a “Tourist Security Battalion,” sending more than a thousand soldiers and police to patrol its most visited beaches and popular nightclubs and bars. Mexican authorities have also quietly explored ways to diminish demand for drugs among tourists without arresting them or discouraging them from visiting — a delicate balance.

Officials in Quintana Roo met recently with representatives from the U.S. Consulate and diplomats from more than a dozen other foreign countries.

“The message was, “We want tourism, but please remember that it’s illegal here to buy drugs,”” Hernández Gutiérrez said.

Asked about the meeting, U.S. Embassy spokesman John Vance said U.S. officials “frequently meet with Mexican officials to make certain we provide accurate and timely information that helps ensure [U.S. citizen’s] safety.”

The Tourist Protection Battalion has already arrested dozens of low-level drug dealers. Most are young men from surrounding states, some of the poorest in Mexico.

Those dealers are replaced almost immediately. Visitors walking down Playa del Carmen’s Quinta Avenida, for example, are still greeted by a chorus of offers: “Hey Amigo, want some weed? Some coke?” Or the more subtle: “You want to party?” — with a finger pointing to a nostril.

“We know it’s not easy to turn off the supply, as long as there is demand,” Hernández Gutiérrez said.

Even some of the troops in the battalion mock the mission. Last week, one unit was sent to a four-star hotel in Cancún to provide security during a concert. One soldier recalled watching tourists get increasingly intoxicated.

“It seems like the Americans, when they come here, just want to get wasted, right?” he asked a reporter.

Adding to the volatility: In Quintana Roo, unlike other states in Mexico, no single cartel predominates. At least six criminal groups operate in the state’s tourist corridor, including three with links to transnational trafficking organizations. The competition among them often turns violent, as groups fight over access to tourist hot spots.

In Tulum, the tourists who were killed in October appear to have been caught in a shootout between two local groups, Los Pelones and Los Compich. Authorities said gunmen from one group spotted a rival dealer in a popular bar called the Malquerida.

“The tourists unfortunately were caught in the middle,” said Óscar Montes de Oca Rosales, Quintana Roo’s attorney general.

Those groups have been at the heart of rising tourist demand for drugs in Tulum, where an underground party culture has boomed in recent years, alongside wellness retreats and yoga classes.

“Working at the hotels here, you get used to being asked to help get drugs. You know, coke, MDMA, ketamine, all of it. We make the introductions to dealers because that’s what the guests want,” said a concierge at a well-known boutique hotel in Tulum. She spoke on the condition of anonymity because she worried about losing her job.

A party promoter in Tulum described the guiding principle as “making sure there’s only one cartel providing drugs at a party, so there’s no fighting between dealers.”

Quintana Roo has suffered 650 homicides so far this year, down from a peak of 866 in 2018, but a marked increase from earlier years. The majority of those killings, authorities say, were between criminal groups, and occurred miles from the state’s tourist corridor.

In November, for example, two homicides took place in separate Cancún gyms. Several drive-by shootings occurred along the main road of La Luna, four miles from the city's famous strip of beachside hotels. Further inland, three victims' bodies were found buried behind an auto repair shop.

On Nov. 27, a Cuban singer, Dayami Lozada, was shot dead by two gunmen on a motorcycle. Though Lozada performed in tourist bars, she was killed — like most of the victims — in a part of the city seldom visited by foreigners.

In Tulum, some of the city's most violent crimes occur in informal settlements, known locally as invasiones, where drug dealers live alongside hotel and restaurant employees, who struggle to find places to live because of soaring housing prices.

Mexican tourist officials and hoteliers have been quick to tell their guests that while Mexico can be violent, their hotels are safe.

"The first thing [we] explain is how far they are from the violent event guests might have seen in the news," said Miriam Cortés Franco, president of the Quintana Roo Vacation Clubs.

Unlike other states in Mexico, where gangs battle for control of territory so they can move drugs toward the U.S. border, coastal Quintana Roo is no longer a major thruway for narcotics. Its value is as a market: a bubble of foreign demand for drugs within Mexico. For that reason, officials say, Mexico's two biggest drug trafficking organizations, the Sinaloa Cartel and the Jalisco New Generation Cartel, both based on the other side of the country, have sent hundreds of foot soldiers to the state.

This month, state officials tracked a convoy of 50 Jalisco cartel gunmen entering Quintana Roo.

More than 18 million tourists visited the state between January and October 2021. More than 3 million of them were Americans. Because Mexico has imposed almost no pandemic-related travel restrictions, it has been a particularly attractive destination to those seeking a break from quarantines. Last Saturday was the second busiest day in the history of the Cancún airport.

Tourism provides more than eight percent of Mexico's GDP. In Cancún, the contribution is roughly 50 percent.

Millions of tourists will experience cities like Cancún and Tulum with no indication of the violence that plagues much of Mexico. The country this year has recorded more than 30,000 homicides, for the fourth consecutive year.

Cartels are typically eager to avoid confrontations with tourists that will affect the local demand for drugs and draw the attention they're now getting from security forces. Earlier this month, a video surfaced of two tourists driving toward Cancún along back roads in the state of Tabasco when they were stopped by armed men, apparent cartel members.

After a few minutes of confusion, the armed men, realizing they had accidentally stopped two foreign tourists, tried to calm them down.

"No problem, no problem," one of the armed men said, and patted one of the tourists on the back, offering him a hug.

Elsewhere in Mexico, officials have seen the way violence can destroy an important tourist destination.

As killings surged in Acapulco, making the city the murder capital of Mexico, international tourism crashed. The number of foreign visitors fell 63 percent from 2012 to 2017.

	<p>Violence there, too, was caused in part by cartels fighting to sell drugs to tourists. As in Quintana Roo, the homicides were concentrated away from tourist hotspots, but the few incidents that did trickle into hotels and restaurants were enough to scare off many would-be visitors.</p> <p>“We know how much depends on our ability to make tourists feel safe,” said Andrés Aguilar, Quintana Roo’s secretary of tourism.</p>
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<b>HEADLINE</b>	<b>12/24 Number fatal encounters w/police still same</b>
<b>SOURCE</b>	<a href="https://www.nytimes.com/2021/12/24/us/police-killings-accountability.html">https://www.nytimes.com/2021/12/24/us/police-killings-accountability.html</a>
<b>GIST</b>	<p>For the second time this year, a jury in Minneapolis has ruled against a former police officer for killing a Black man.</p> <p>Like the conviction of Derek Chauvin for the murder of George Floyd, the verdict on Thursday against Kimberly Potter on two counts of manslaughter for the shooting death of Daunte Wright during a traffic stop represented an unusual decision to send a police officer to prison.</p> <p>And yet, despite the two high-profile convictions in Minneapolis, a review of the data a year and a half after America’s summer of protest shows that accountability for officers who kill remains elusive and that the sheer numbers of people killed in encounters with police have remained steady at an alarming level.</p> <p>The murder of Mr. Floyd on a Minneapolis street corner drew millions to the streets in protest and set off a national reassessment on race that touched almost every aspect of American life, from corporate boardrooms to sports nicknames. But on the core issues that set off the social unrest in the first place — police violence and accountability — very little has changed.</p> <p>Since Mr. Floyd’s death in May of last year, 1,646 people have been killed by the police, or about three people per day on average, according to Mapping Police Violence, a nonprofit that tracks people killed by the police. Although murder or manslaughter charges against officers have increased this year, criminal charges, much less convictions, remain exceptionally rare.</p> <p>That underscores both the benefit of the doubt usually accorded law officers who are often making life-or-death decisions in a split second and the way the law and the power of police unions often protect officers, say activists and legal experts.</p> <p>The convictions of both Mr. Chauvin, the former Minneapolis officer who was captured on an excruciating bystander video pinning Mr. Floyd to the ground for more than nine minutes as he gasped for air, and Ms. Potter strike some experts as tantalizing glimpses of a legal system in flux. Ms. Potter’s case, in particular, reflected the kind of split-second decision — she mistakenly used her gun instead of her Taser after Mr. Wright tried to flee an arrest — that jurors usually excuse even when something goes horribly wrong</p> <p>Chris Uggen, a sociology and law professor at the University of Minnesota, said that even though the number of people killed by police remained prevalent, high-profile cases could still send a message to the police. “The probability of punishment is not zero,” he said. “So it moves the needle to some degree, and it can certainly affect the behaviors of police officers.”</p> <p>But many experts are reluctant to read too much into a few isolated cases carried out in the glare of media scrutiny.</p> <p>“Criminal trials are not designed to be instruments of change,” said Paul Butler, a professor at Georgetown University Law Center and a former prosecutor. “Criminal trials are about bringing individual wrongdoers to justice. So while there have been high-profile prosecutions of police officers for killing Black people, that doesn’t in and of itself lead to the kind of systemic reform that might reduce police violence.”</p>



Philip M. Stinson, a criminal justice professor at Bowling Green State University in Ohio, who tracks police criminal charges and convictions, said Ms. Potter was the first female police officer convicted of a murder or manslaughter charge in an on-duty shooting since 2005. He said he believed that the number of deaths from excessive police force was higher than what was recorded and reflected in news coverage.

“Many police officers exhibit a fear of Black people,” he said. “Until we can address that, it is very difficult to bring about meaningful reforms.”

Gloria J. Browne-Marshall, a constitutional law professor at John Jay College of Criminal Justice in New York, said accountability also needed to be aimed at prosecutors who gave officers “carte blanche” for a century until the recent show of public outrage. Change is not likely to come soon, she said.

“In these individual cases, justice won in the end,” she said. “But there is a lot of work that still needs to be done.”

Jim Pasco, the executive director of the National Fraternal Order of Police, said the rarity of criminal charges against officers doesn’t indicate a lack of accountability, but simply reflects that the vast majority of police shootings are lawful — with many occurring under dangerous circumstances where officers have to make quick, life-or-death situations.

There has been no finding of fault against officers in many of the other recent high-profile cases of people killed in encounters with the police.

Less than three weeks after the murder of Mr. Floyd, an officer in Atlanta fatally shot a Black man named Rayshard Brooks, who was fleeing a Wendy’s parking lot after taking a Taser from the officer’s partner and firing it at him. The killing in Atlanta, like that of Mr. Floyd’s, was captured on bystander video and drew protesters, adding to the demands for justice and accountability over the number of African Americans killed by the police.

And about two months before Mr. Floyd’s murder, Breonna Taylor was killed in her Louisville apartment during a botched police raid that targeted an ex-boyfriend for alleged drug crimes. Her name, too, became familiar to millions of Americans.

Yet the officers involved in the Taylor case have largely been cleared, even as federal authorities continue to investigate. And in Atlanta, Mr. Brooks’s case stalled this summer as it was passed to a third prosecutor, who is starting the investigation all over again. The officer who shot Mr. Brooks [has been charged with murder](#), but there is no timeline for a trial.

“We are taking a fresh look at it and starting from Day 1,” said Pete Skandalakis, the special prosecutor in Georgia who took over the case. He added that he could not predict when the case would see a courtroom.

That has left Mr. Brooks’s family wondering if they will ever see justice.

“I think we’re all just lost right now,” said L. Chris Stewart, a lawyer who represents the Brooks family. “We don’t know what to think or what’s going on.”

According to data kept by Mr. Stinson and a research team at Bowling Green, 21 officers this year have been charged with murder or manslaughter for an on-duty shooting — although five of the officers charged are for the [same encounter](#), the killing in November 2020 of a 15-year-old boy who was a suspect in an armed robbery.

While this is an increase from the 16 officers charged in 2020, and the highest number since Mr. Stinson began compiling the data since 2005, it remains small next to the roughly 1,100 people killed by the police annually. (Just as the pace of killings since Mr. Floyd’s death has remained largely unchanged, racial disparities have also stayed the same. Black people are still two and a half to three times as likely as white people to be killed by a police officer, according to Mapping Police Violence.)

While Mr. Chauvin's trial was underway in the spring, Mr. Wright's death at the hands of Ms. Potter in Brooklyn Center, a Minneapolis suburb, set off new rounds of protests in the Twin Cities. And in the rest of America, the number of new cases of people killed in encounters with the police continued apace, some of them piercing the national consciousness and adding to the names protesters shouted in the streets.

Among them were [Adam Toledo](#), a 13-year-old Latino boy who was killed by a Chicago police officer after running down a dark alleyway with a gun. And in Columbus, Ohio, shortly before the jury reached a decision in the Chauvin trial, a 16-year-old Black girl named [Ma'Khia Bryant](#) was shot to death by an officer as she swung a knife at a young woman.

A state agency investigated Ma'Khia's death and, in July, turned its findings over to local prosecutors in Franklin County. At the time, the state attorney general said he expected it to take prosecutors "several weeks" to make a charging decision, but a spokeswoman for G. Gary Tyack, the county's top prosecutor, said the case was still under review five months later.

More recently, at a high school football game in a suburb of Pennsylvania this fall, police officers opened fire amid a crowd after they heard gunshots, killing an 8-year-old Black girl named [Fanta Bility](#). All of these cases remain under investigation, and no charges have been filed against the officers involved.

One of the reasons for Mr. Chauvin's conviction was that the circumstances of the case differed so starkly from so many other cases in which officers were cleared by prosecutors or juries: There was no split-second decision made in an environment in which Mr. Chauvin could argue that his life, or those of other officers, was in danger.

In the trial of Ms. Potter, which played out in the same courtroom where Mr. Chauvin was tried, her defense lawyers said Ms. Potter acted reasonably in using force because she feared for the life of a fellow officer, a scenario more emblematic of a typical police killing case.

This time, that argument did not work.

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HEADLINE	<b>12/24 Inspiring others: cold case investigations</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.seattletimes.com/seattle-news/law-justice/cold-case-detective-forensic-dna-scientist-hope-to-inspire-others-after-solving-infamous-spokane-crime/">https://www.seattletimes.com/seattle-news/law-justice/cold-case-detective-forensic-dna-scientist-hope-to-inspire-others-after-solving-infamous-spokane-crime/</a>
GIST	<p>The Spokane community in 1959, left reeling from the brutal murder of 9-year-old Candice "Candy" Elaine Rogers, decided it had to do something. So with the help of then-Spokesman-Review columnist Dorothy Powers, funds were raised to open Spokane's first crime laboratory in 1960.</p> <p>"Out of the murder of a child, a crime laboratory for a city," a headline in The Spokesman-Review read at the time.</p> <p>More than 60 years later, Brittany Wright, forensic DNA scientist with that same lab, along with Spokane Police Sgt. Zac Storment, found Rogers' killer and closed one of the city's most notorious cold cases.</p> <p><b>Cold cases passed down through generations</b></p> <p>For detectives, some cases can't be forgotten. They become part of an entire career, Storment said.</p> <p>When Storment started in the Major Crimes Division, he was immediately drawn to the small successes on decades-old cases the veteran detectives would mention over coffee at the unit's morning meeting.</p> <p>Storment came to the unit wanting to work homicides.</p> <p>"They're a great challenge, and I find them rewarding," Storment said. "And as you progress in those, you slowly get to learn about the ones that are cold."</p>

He began working with longtime Detective Kip Hollenbeck on the Ruby Doss case. Doss, a sex worker in Spokane, was beaten and strangled in 1986. The case quickly went cold until a DNA hit came back in 2015 linking former Pasco Police Officer Richard Aguirre to the case.

Aguirre was tried earlier this year on a first-degree murder charge but a mistrial was declared after the jury said it could not reach a verdict.

As the “old guard” in the Major Crimes unit began to retire about five years ago, they turned in their cases in to Storment, a unit supervisor.

“The ones that I had heard about and was super interested in, when they landed on my desk I just kind of kept them for my own,” Storment said.

With Storment’s interest in cold cases well-known among his peers, Detective Brian Hammond, fresh off using genetic genealogy to solve the 1985 murder of 12-year-old Marsi Leah Belec, began working with Storment on the Rogers case as he prepared to retire in February.

### **DNA: a ‘precious little resource’**

As he took on more cold cases, Storment began submitting “massive” amounts of evidence to the Washington State Patrol Crime Lab for testing.

He didn’t know Wright, but she took the time to sit him down and have an honest conversation.

Think of isolated DNA as cookie dough, she said.

“There’s only so much of it, and there’s only so much you can do with it,” Wright said.

If you only have enough for 12 cookies and you do tests haphazardly, you’ve baked all your dough and there’s no more, she explained.

“You can’t bake the dough twice,” Wright said, so choose wisely.

Wright started at the crime lab in 2013 and quickly developed an interest in cold cases.

“They are the absolute challenge,” she said. “You’re going off of very little information. It’s the ultimate case where you have to really try to put yourself in that moment, in that scene, to figure out what may have happened between the victim and the perpetrator, where may they have touched something.”

Many forensic scientists get frustrated with cold cases, she said. They take a lot of time and energy, often for little to no reward. Somehow, Wright persisted, working 40 to 50 cold cases from across the region.

After that conversation with Storment, the pair decided to save some of the DNA in the Rogers case for testing by future technology. Wright was aware that sequencing was on the horizon, she said.

“I finally started understanding that you got to make very judicious decisions with your DNA because it’s a precious, precious little resource,” Storment said.

While working another cold case in Bremerton, Wright met with well-known cold case investigator Paul Holes. Holes told Wright about Othram, a lab in Texas that had the capability to analyze older, degraded DNA through sequencing.

To explain DNA sequencing, Wright uses the example of an encyclopedia. Standard DNA testing will read a volume, or chapters of a volume, in that encyclopedia. Sequencing reads every single letter, Wright said.

“It’s reading every single letter, every single word for your entire genetic code,” Wright said.

Immediately after learning of the lab's work, Wright thought of the Rogers case, and just weeks later a DNA sample was on its way to Othram.

### **Bittersweet success**

A little more than six months later, Wright and Storment stood above John Reigh Hoff's grave as his body was exhumed. DNA testing done by Wright later confirmed the match and led police to announce him as Rogers' killer.

In the distance, Rogers' mausoleum stood tall.

"We could kind of tell her in a sense that, we know," Storment said.

For both Storment and Wright, solving the Rogers case was their first big cold case success.

"There's so much of you that just starts to doubt," Wright said of her years working cold cases without solving one. "My first reaction, I was super excited, and then I got hit with a lot of grief about the actual victim. The day when I got it solved, there was a lot of ups and there was a lot of downs."

Cold cases like Rogers' slaying often go unworked for decades because they aren't the focus of anyone's job. Recently, Storment was selected as one of two detectives working on the sexual assault kits that are being tested after a new law was passed in 2019.

Working those sexual assault kits — often cold — is Storment's main job. He finds time to work cold case homicides when he can. Other investigators in the Major Crimes unit don't have time to take up cold cases with a surge in homicides over the last two years, Storment said.

Even if a cold case unit was set up, progress would be slow. Storment estimates that a unit with three detectives could solve about three cold cases a year. The other option to move cold cases forward would be to send DNA to a lab like Othram to be tested, but not work the cases until resources were available, Storment said.

"As we speak, the DNA is degrading on our shelves," he said.

But the testing is expensive, costing between \$2,000 and \$5,000 a case.

Despite all the struggles working cold cases, both Storment and Wright hope their recent success with the Rogers case inspires others in their fields to take up the difficult work.

"My favorite thing about this case is I really hope it has a ripple effect of motivating other forensic scientists to dedicate the time to do these cases," Wright said.

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